COD: INFINITE WARFARE IS SPACE A LEAP TOO FAR?



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FRONTLINE EXCLUSIVE

BATTLEFIELD

★ FIRST GAMEPLAY VERDICT
★ MULTIPLAYER EXPLORED
★ NEW SCREENS
★ EXCLUSIVE DICE INTERVIEW

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS
DEUS EX MANKIND DIVIDED
Hands-on with Square Enix's most ambitious RPG of the year

NEW DETAILS
GRAN TURISMO SPORT
The track master returns to take pole position

POKÉMON STARTER SHOWDOWN
Which will you choose?

10 MUST-WATCH INDIES
The small games looking to make a big impact

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My initial thought on seeing *Battlefield 1*'s debut in trailer form was, 'Oh please, don't trivialise this war with quick time events and unlockables'. It was a gut reaction that the First World War carries with it a sombre respect that modern videogames might trample all over in the hunt for great 'Levolution' possibilities.

While EA and DICE have yet to address this concern to my full satisfaction, I'm currently erring on the side of cautious optimism. I'm going to hope that *Battlefield* tackling the difficult and morally complex theatres of the First World War is a sign that the games industry has matured. I'm going to hope that triple-A game developers feel that they can stand toe-to-toe with the best literature and movies in depicting challenging visions of the human condition and the best and worst that we can do to one another. I'm going to hope that this interactive experience will give greater weight and understanding to a period of time that we feel so much more detached from than more recent conflicts.

It possibly doesn't help that games lift so much of their visual language from the film industry, and there are relatively few famous First World War movies to draw from as influence compared to WWII. And for all the horrors of that conflict, I don't feel as uncomfortable with entertainment that plays within that era.

So again, I lean towards optimism that my concerns are merely a lack of media exposure to this time and that in approaching it from an interactive angle, DICE might hit upon not only a great FPS game, but a mature and forward-thinking piece of entertainment too.

Jon Gordon

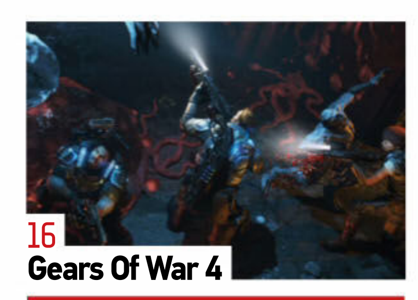
Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR






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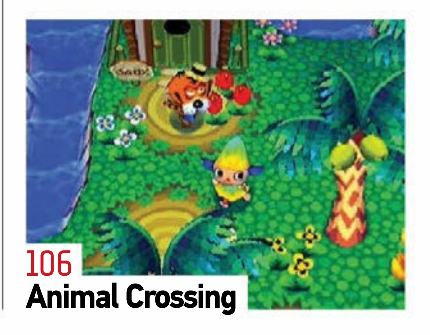

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BATTLEFIELD 1

Find out why heading back to the First World War has put DICE's shooter at the top of our FPS wishlist

Discuss

NEWS
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YOUR VIEWS



ANOTHER DIMENSION

HTC Vive is the best and worst of VR

→ Valve and HTC have combined to create the highest standard of VR to date, but it brings into relief what makes this new tech both exciting and problematic

We've had plenty of time with Oculus Rift and tested PlayStation VR extensively, but neither of them come close to the virtual reality experience of HTC Vive. The difference is that it's a combination of the best elements of both devices, offering the fidelity of Rift and the interactivity of PlayStation VR when it's combined with Move controllers. The use of remotes and sensors to give you a full room VR experience is what makes Vive stand out. The immersion into the experience is more complete, the reality more convincing.

But HTC Vive represents the biggest barrier to entry for all of the VR tech currently looking to get attention. At $799 the kit is $200 more expensive than Oculus Rift out of the box and that's before you even consider the likely costs of making sure your PC is up to spec to run the devices. Conservatively, even if you keep your rig relatively up to date with new upgrades, you could be looking at $1,000 as an entry price to join the VR revolution and that's realistically a lot more than most of us are going to be able to afford. Accessibility and affordability are massive hurdles for all the VR headsets to overcome, even PlayStation VR is likely to have this issue to some extent, and for the HTC Vive that barrier is tougher to crack than for the others.

But it is extraordinary, of that there can be no doubt. You first realise this as you set up the Vive and step into the testing room that is your first introduction to the tech. Headset on, ears plugged with headphones, you're instructed to pick up the remotes and without thinking you'll walk to them and grab them. Except you're not seeing them. You're seeing the VR representation of them that happens to be one-for-one exactly where they are in the room around you. It's a small representation of the precision this tech has that indicates how smooth the experience is going to be from there onwards.

What it brings to mind is the feeling we had first trying out the Wii. That thrill of interacting with a digital world in a new way is just as palpable, only now caught up with more advanced and intricate technology. But for the most part experiences in VR are similarly as light and gimmicky as they were on Nintendo's hardware. While some titles have hinted at deeper gameplay and more robust mechanics, they are largely still tech demos, showing off what HTC Vive can do, but not coming close to offering a narrative or multiplayer experience that will last for longer periods of time.

And visually, while the one-for-one tracking can be dazzling, VR in its current state is still rather simplistic. The pixels of the screen are often visible, and cartoon or exaggerated art styles are common, covering up some of the limitations. It's a little like taking a step back a generation in order for

DATA STREAM → NO MAN'S SKY'S RELEASE HAS BEEN PUSHED BACK TO 12 AUGUST IN THE UK

Right The HTC Vive hardware is very high quality and well built. The headset is solid and a little on the heavy side, but well supported and comfortable on the head. The controllers are pretty light, but feel good in the hand.



Right The addition of the remotes is a massive part of what makes the HTC Vive so much more appealing than the Oculus Rift. It allows for out of the box interactivity with virtual worlds that the competition cannot replicate at the moment.



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Left Setting up the Vive is relatively straight-forward so long as you have the right gear. To mount the sensors you'll either need tripods with plenty of height or to drill holes in your walls. You also need plenty of clear floor area for moving around.

the dual image that's outputted to the headset to remain smooth. It can sometimes feel, therefore, as if even the HTC Vive is showing potential rather than final proof of the VR concept. And that's a daunting prospect given the financial layout involved.

It's as demanding on your other resources as it is likely to be on your bank account. Fortunately we have access to photographic equipment, such as tripods and such, so setting up the Vive sensors for viewing our playing space wasn't too much trouble. Likewise, finding room in our office didn't prove too much of a challenge, although we did just barely make the cut in terms of using the minimum required space for moving around in VR. In a bedroom where clear floor space is typically at a premium (we're making no judgements here, beds take up a lot of room) or even in a living room where sofas, coffee tables and more will typically be occupying space, trying to fulfil the needs of Vive to get the best experience is going to be tough. For many it is essentially impractical, even before you get to the expense of it.

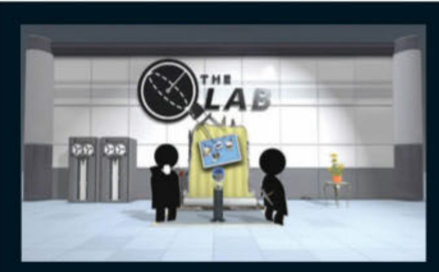
HTC Vive is utterly captivating. Putting the headset on and experiencing what Valve and others have put together for it is easily the best VR experience we've ever had. However, it only manages to put in sharp relief the challenges of accessibility and price that

> "The HTC Vive is showing potential rather than final proof of the VR concept"

face all the VR tech right now. If anything, it proves that a full-room experience is superior to a static one and perhaps that puts Sony's PlayStation VR in a stronger position than some might have thought. While the Vive is hitting retail soon and will be available to all, we're not expecting it to launch a VR revolution, just as Oculus Rift hasn't. To try out Vive is to want one for yourself desperately, but wanting it and being able to have it and use it at its best are still too far apart. VR has a long way left to go.

KEY GAMES AND EXPERIENCES

The titles that will convince you Vive is worth it



THE LAB

Valve's own VR testing area is available for free and acts as a great showcase of the kind of interactive games you can play with the device. It even features a cameo from everyone's favourite psychotic and murderous robot AI, GLaDOS.



JOB SIMULATOR

You may have seen some of this being played by YouTubers and there's a reason; this is a great little sandbox of madness. Enter a robot-created 'human' world, photocopying donuts and making delicious cactus and hot sauce smoothies. It's magical.



CLOUDLANDS: VR MINIGOLF

Minigolf action in the VR space comes in many varieties – this is the best we played. Using just one remote as your club, it requires no button presses to swing, and the physics are excellent.



AUDIOSHIELD

A great example of rhythm action in VR: defend yourself from waves of musically-fuelled energy balls with a pair of shields, one red, one blue, in each hand. It's easy to understand and increasingly challenging if you pick the right song.



VANISHING REALMS

Tricky to design an RPG where you can't really rely on players having much field of movement, but this game manages it. It requires at least 2x2m to work, but it's a fun sword and sorcery experience.



SONY HAS SET ITSELF A TARGET OF 60 MILLION PS4 CONSOLES TO BE SOLD BY APRIL 2017

VICTORY LAP

What has Hideo Kojima been learning?

→ Since January, Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima has been on a whistle-stop tour of the world, visiting studios big and small in the games and film industry, but what might he have picked up?

BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON, USA 21 JAN

Visiting: Sucker Punch, Infamous developer

Notes: *InFamous: Second Son* has been rightly praised for its use of the PS4 hardware in optimising its engine. Kojima was likely interested to see how far he might be able to push his PS4 exclusive title from the newly formed Kojima Productions.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 16 FEB

Visiting: Sony Santa Monica Studio, maker of *God Of War* series

Notes: Another big Sony studio, but a team that's been working on a wide variety of titles, supporting third parties like The Chinese Room, thatgamecompany and others in getting their titles finished. Possible partnership for Kojima Productions?

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 17 FEB

Visiting: Nicolas Winding Refn, director of *Drive*

Notes: A fascinating film director, and someone who works very well with visuals and tone. We cans see why his work would be of interest to Kojima stylistically.



BEND, OREGON, USA 22 JAN

Visiting: Bend Studios, makers of Syphon Filter

Notes: With around 90 employees, Bend Studio is about the size that Hideo Kojima has stated he would like his new team to be. Most recently the team has been making PS Vita titles, but it's been hiring for PS4 work.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 20 JAN

Visiting: J.J. Abrams, American film director, producer

Notes: The *Star Wars* director and Japanese game maker go way back. With Abrams visual style and Kojima's commitment to exploration of deeper themes in games we can see these two having much to debate.

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, USA 19 JAN

Visiting: VASG, Visual Arts Service Group

Notes: A ten-day tour with Sony's Mark Cerny on the hunt for new technology began with this performance capture company. Kojima has made it clear he's looking for engines and tech to support development of his first indie game.

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS 26 JAN

Visiting: Guerrilla Games, maker of Killzone series

Notes: Guerrilla has been pushing PlayStation hardware for the last couple of generations, so it's no surprise Kojima would want to take a look at its engine tech and how it operates as a company.

LONDON, ENGLAND 24 JAN

Visiting: Midge Ure, musician

Notes: Having met with the SCEA's music team in California, Kojima headed to London and bumped into something of a music legend. Plenty of name-checking on this trip.

LONDON, ENGLAND 25 JAN

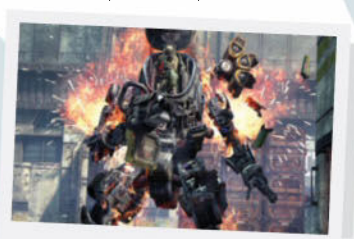
Visiting: SCE London Studio, Singstar, PlayStation VR developer

Notes: The London Studio team is one of those that's always innovating, playing with technology that's on the periphery and spinning fun games from it. Right now that means VR, which Kojima has expressed some interest in.

GUILDFORD, ENGLAND 25 JAN

Visiting: Media Molecule, *LittleBigPlanet* developer

Notes: It seems this was an important meeting for Hideo Kojima as he has since stated he wants his new studio to mimic that of the *LittleBigPlanet* and *Tearaway* team; small and like a family. Apparently kitchen placement is important too.



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 18 FEB

Visiting: Riot Games, maker of *League Of Legends*

Notes: Riot CEO Brandon Beck was on hand to meet up with the Japanese game-maker to talk about the developers success with *League Of Legends*. We doubt Kojima will be moving into MOBAs, but there's so much to learn from Riot.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 20 FEB

Visiting: Respawn Entertainment, *Titanfall* developer

Notes: Vince Zampella is another great example of a developer leaving a massive company and franchise (Activision and *Call Of Duty*) to start something new. Respawn's work on *Titanfall* should give a lot of hope to the Japanese game-maker.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 24 MAR

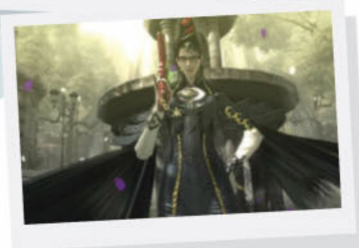
Visiting: Prologue, 3D animation studio

Notes: After returning home for a short while, Kojima was back in LA and seemingly spent a few days working with Prologue in its motion capture studio. Prologue worked on the main titles of two *Metal Gear* games as well as the *Destiny: House Of Wolves* cinematic.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA 25 MAR

Visiting: Guillermo del Toro, film director

Notes: Kojima and del Toro were finally reunited having seen their proposed collaboration on *Silent Hills* collapse at Konami. Any chances of them working together on the first independent Kojima Productions game? We imagine not, but perhaps in the future.



DATA STREAM → IOS HIT MONUMENT VALLEY HAS MADE AN IMPRESSIVE $14.4 MILLION IN TWO YEARS

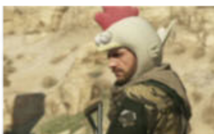
What makes a Hideo Kojima game?

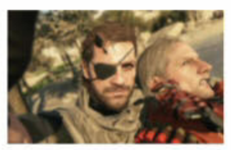
The elements we can expect from his next project













POLITICAL THEMES

Kojima games have tended to tackle large political issues, most commonly war in the *Metal Gear* series for obvious reasons. We don't expect that to change with future projects.

MISDIRECTION

Are you really playing as the character you think? Kojima has played with his audience on a number of occasions. You can't always trust what you see in his games.

STRONG ARTISTIC VISION

As a student of film and lover of cinematic motifs, Kojima's games always have a clear visual style and artistic flair. He's toned down the cutscenes a little, but otherwise this trait remains.

INSIDE JOKES

As serious as the themes of his games can be, Kojima has a tendency not to take other matters quite so seriously. He likes an in-joke and he likes poking fun at games as a medium.

FOURTH WALL-BREAKING

As an extension of not taking things too seriously we have the fact that his games often acknowledge how weird and fictional they are, like Psycho Mantis and his 'psychic' antics.

A CAMEO

Like cinematic legend Alfred Hitchcock, Kojima isn't beyond placing himself in his game as a fun nod to fans. His appearance in *Metal Gear Solid V* was a classic example.

PARIS, FRANCE 27 JAN

Visiting: Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain, Beyond: Two Souls* developer

Notes: We would have loved to have been a fly on the wall as David Cage and Hideo Kojima discussed game-making philosophies. Two of the most cinematically influenced game-makers around. We imagine some ideas will originate from here.

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN 17 MAY

Visiting: DICE, maker of *Battlefield*

Notes: Kojima was wrapping up his world tour with some Scandinavian studios (lots of great games coming from this region these days) and top of the list was DICE. Kojima praised the tech the team uses in particular. Frostbite is a great engine.

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN 17 MAY

Visiting: Resolution/Snowprint, game developers

Notes: A quick lunch with Resolution Games and Snowprint Studios may have proved important as both are relatively small developers working on independent titles. No break was wasted on this trip.

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN 17 MAY

Visiting: Mojang, maker of *Minecraft*

Notes: A big day of activity in Stockholm was wrapped up with meeting Mojang. As another small team that's exploded into a blockbuster developer, we imagine there was much to learn here. *Minecraft* is simple, but supports its community really well.

MALMÖ, SWEDEN 18 MAY

Visiting: Massive Entertainment, *The Division* developer

Notes: Meeting the maker of *Tom Clancy's The Division* seems to have been important as Kojima has since stated fans of this game and *Uncharted* will be pleased by what he's going to work on as his first project as an indie game-maker.

MALMÖ, SWEDEN 18 MAY

Visiting: Tarsier Studios, developer of *LBP* on Vita

Notes: With 40 staff, Tarsier is a reasonably sized studio, but has mostly worked on porting and supporting Media Molecule titles. It does have a stunning indie game in the works though called *Hunger*. Tarsier is a quietly excellent game-maker.

OSAKA, JAPAN 4 FEB

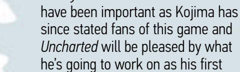
Visiting: Platinum Games, *Bayonetta* developer

Notes: Meeting up with Tatsuya Minami, CEO of Platinum, we imagine the key subject was how a group of highly creative Japanese developers managed to break away from their established jobs at a big publisher and make it solo.

FUKUOKA, JAPAN 3 FEB

Visiting: Level5, maker of *Yo-Kai Watch*

Notes: Level5 has been making games for the last 16 years, but has found particular success of late thanks to *Yo-Kai Watch*, its ghost-catching and battling game. Kojima met up with CEO and president Akihiro Hino.











What Kojima Said

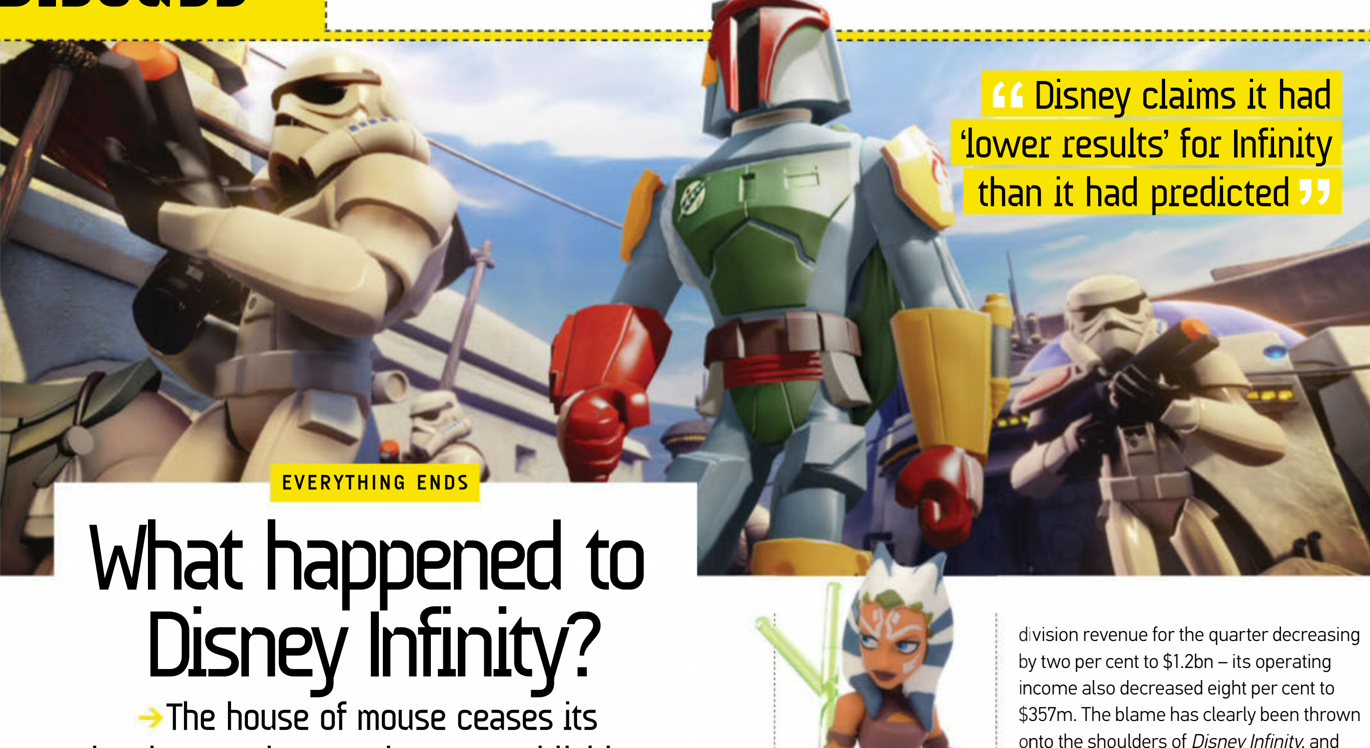
AFTER MONTHS OF meeting developers and getting ideas for his new game as well as how to construct his new-look studio, Kojima spoke at Malmö's Nordic Game conference about what he is now planning.

"We are trying to create a big, edgy game, [the kind] you might be wishing to have, but with a small team. At the beginning, I thought I'd be making a small game, but my friends and fans around the world told me that what they were waiting for was to play a big, edgy game as early as possible. So, my first title will be something like that. I can't say when, but I'm hoping you can play with it as soon as possible. But I believe it will take quite some time."





NINTENDO'S SUPER MARIO MAKER HAS MANAGED TO SELL 3.5 MILLION COPIES ON WII U



> “Disney claims it had ‘lower results’ for Infinity than it had predicted”

EVERYTHING ENDS

What happened to Disney Infinity?

→ The house of mouse ceases its involvement in console game publishing

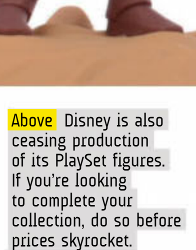
D*isney Infinity* is over, the first major blow to the toys-to-life market following its emergence in 2011. Developer Avalanche has been closed after two decades of service, its hundreds of staff now out of work. Disney Interactive Studios will never publish another game; it will simply fade into obscurity while quietly licensing out its brands to other developers.

In many respects, this isn't a huge surprise. Disney has been struggling in the videogame market for some time now. It laid off 700 staff from its Internet and Games division back in 2014 – Interactive Studios was reportedly losing $200 million a year between 2008 and 2012 – and the focus on *Disney Infinity* was to be a last ditch effort to survive. It almost worked, too. It was only back in December 2015 that the publisher reported *Disney Infinity* had become the number one ranking game in the genre; the *Star Wars* play sets alone generated over $200m in revenue.

So what happened? That isn't as clear. Unrealistic expectations on the brand have potentially played a part, as has high production costs, as has peaks and drops in interest between the various play sets – we can only imagine it wasn't overly cost effective to have a studio with just under 300 staff working on *Disney Infinity* while still farming out the DLC to other studios.

Disney claims it had “lower results” for *Infinity* than it had predicted, with the Consumer Products and Interactive Media division revenue for the quarter decreasing by two per cent to $1.2bn – its operating income also decreased eight per cent to $357m. The blame has clearly been thrown onto the shoulders of *Disney Infinity*, and now nearly 300 developers are out of work and the future of the toys-to-life market is looking a little unstable as a result.

This shouldn't really come as a surprise either, especially as you consider the large volume of mistakes made by Interactive Studios over the last decade. Disney has had a turbulent time in the videogame industry, pumping out several games that were deemed critical and commercial failures. Games were pulled mid-production, licences shut away, while LucasArts, Propaganda Games, Black Rock Studio and Junction Point Studios (and now Avalanche) were closed abruptly. *Disney Infinity* is getting an unceremonious end – the *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Finding Dory* Play Sets will be the final releases – as Disney closes a particularly difficult chapter to its history.



Above Disney is also ceasing production of its PlaySet figures. If you're looking to complete your collection, do so before prices skyrocket.

THE CASUALTIES OF DISNEY INTERACTIVE



LUCASARTS

Following its acquisition in 2012 – made as part of Disney's 2012 purchase of LucasFilm for $4.05 billion – it took just six months for legendary game studio LucasArts to be closed down. That's a move that ensured we never received *Star Wars 1313*, the action-adventure game starring a young Boba Fett.



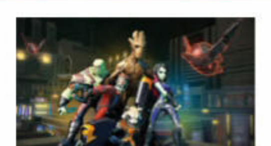
PROPAGANDA GAMES

A part of the Disney Interactive Studios unit, Propaganda was active for just six years before being closed. The studio worked on the *Turok* 2008 reboot and *Tron: Evolution*, both of which were poorly received. That left *Turok 2* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned* to be canned.



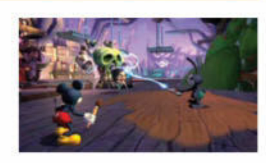
BLACK ROCK STUDIOS

In 2006 Disney acquired famed UK developer Climax Racing, known for the *MotoGP* and *ATV Offroad* franchises, before renaming it Black Rock and setting it to work on *Pure* and *Split/Second*. Sequels to both games were abandoned and the studio was shut in 2011 after lower than expected sales.



AVALANCHE SOFTWARE

Purchased in 2005 by Disney, Avalanche worked on numerous licensed kids titles before shifting its full attention to *Disney Infinity*. This was supposed to be the way to save Disney's game publishing arm, but in the end it wouldn't prove to be enough, eventually shutting its doors in 2016.



JUNCTION POINT GAMES

Disney purchased Warren Spector's studio Junction Point in 2007 though it would close just six years later following the disaster that was *Epic Mickey* and its sequel *The Power Of Two*. With poor critical and commercial responses, the titles failed to make use of the Mickey license in any impactful way.

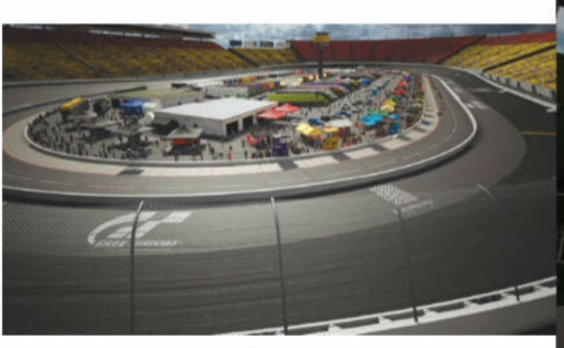
DATA STREAM → CAPCOM HAS NAMED STREET FIGHTER II OPENING CREDIT FIGHTERS SCOTT AND MAX

Above: Weekend racing events will be broadcast live for other *GT Sport* fans to watch and will feature commentary as well as full camera direction of the event, just like televised racing coverage in the real world. Right: The game's Nation's Cup will look to find the best drivers in each nation in a World Cup style format, while the Manufacturer's Cup finds the best drivers of Mercedes, BMWs and so on to compete for the top prize.



NOT FOR THE BETA

WHEN *GRAN TURISMO Sport* was originally announced last year it was suggested that a beta test for the game would kick off early in 2016. Now with the game being given a November release date, Polyphony has decided to back out of the beta plan. According to game's creator and Polyphony CEO Kazunori Yamauchi, not having to develop a gold master of the game for beta testing its online components saves the team around three months of additional development time. That means they can crack on with making sure the game is ready for launch. It does make us a little concerned that it won't get a chance to stress test its online infrastructure however, especially given the issues faced by *DriveClub* when it launched in 2014.





Right: A livery editor is included with *GT Sports*, largely we think to help competitive players and teams give themselves an identity, but it will be interesting to see what more we can do with it, much like with *Forza Motorsport*.





Gran Turismo Sport

CONCEPT ■ The great racing sim on PlayStation joins another generation of hardware, but this time there's a competitive twist

Not one for the Sunday drivers

A great *Gran Turismo* experience can take you to a Zen place. You enter into a trance of driving perfection, engulfed by the precision and beauty of the game, lulled by the familiar curves and rhythms of the circuits, and drawn in by its demand for total concentration. You are at once totally focused and clear of thought. If *GT Sport* is changing anything about this in particular, it's that it is perhaps moving away a little from the meditative driving fan and leaning towards its hardcore, competitive block.

That's why this is *Gran Turismo Sport* rather than *Gran Turismo 7* and not an in-between Prologue game either. This is a full release with 137 exotic vehicles, 19 locations and 37 track variants. Classic circuits like Willow Springs, Brands Hatch and the Nordschleife return along with new tests to your driving skill in the Northern Isle Speedway and Tokyo street circuit.

But as we say, the focus here is online, as competition is being put at the heart of the game. A calendar of scheduled online events is front and centre of the landing page as you start the game, inviting you to take part in what promises to be some of the fiercest online racing of the generation. Why? Because this actually has something up for grabs that gearheads can really appreciate. As if doubling down on the incredible stories of *GT* players making it as professional race car drivers, the Nation's Cup and Manufacturer's Cup tournaments in the game could earn you a real-world FIA license that will allow you to drive at motor clubs in Spain, China and the UK. 22 automobile bodies recognise the license and it once again ties the *GT* experience deeply into people's real love of cars and driving.

It's also an example of why this game might not be for the casual *GT* appreciator, but if online isn't your thing then there are other additions to this game that might appeal. For instance, off the starting grid you have the new Scapes mode, which is *GT*'s very own photo mode with a twist. Rather than capturing stills from the middle of racing events or taking snaps of your favourite cars in a garage situation, you can pick from 1,000 different background images and place your car into them. It's a fully 3D, rendered environment allowing you to move the cars around the landscape where they will scale and rotate as appropriate, casting shadows and light from the headlamps as is appropriate. Watching it in action beggars belief. It's like watching a real-time 3D rendering program Photoshop objects together. And it all outputs to images at 4K, which is pretty impressive too.

Which segues us nicely to *Gran Turismo Sports*' graphics, always an important element of conversation for this series. As it happens it's not always immediately obvious how much has really been improved here. This is in part because *GT6* was stunning on PS3 and an incredible achievement for that piece of hardware. It also doesn't help that *Project Cars* and *Forza Motorsport 6* have already proved impressive this generation. However, the use of real-time shadow and lighting effects in *GT Sport* looks even more dynamic than we've seen elsewhere, as does the way that smoke and dust hang in the air after mishaps on the track. With frontline graphics being of a high standard as a matter of course, it's the smaller details that shine through. Certainly the images from Scapes look incredible and the rest of the game isn't up to this standard, but it's by no means shabby.

> "Equipped with Polyphony Digital's own rendering engine and game engine, you can feel realistic 'light', and the expression of detail has advanced greatly"
>
> PRESS RELEASE POLYPHONY DIGITAL

GT Sport is going to be an interesting experiment for Sony and Polyphony Digital, both as a non-numbered entry into the popular racing series and as a test of a new competitive online market. Sony has yet to really make a mark in this field while Microsoft charges forward with most of its exclusive titles. This could be a sign of things to come.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Polyphony Digital
Release: 18 November 2016
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Polyphony Digital has marked itself out as the premier developer of racing games in the business. While the likes of Turn10 and most recently Slightly Mad have made a challenge to this studios dominance through *Gran Turismo*, it is still this series that we tend to measure others by.

Developer History

Gran Turismo 4 **2004 [PS2]**
Tourist Trophy **2006 [PS2]**
Gran Turismo 5 **2010 [PS3]**
Gran Turismo 6 **2013 [PS3]**

High Point

The original *Gran Turismo*, released nearly 20 years ago, still stands out as one of the greatest moments in the history of the PlayStation brand.

Gears Of War 4

CONCEPT ■ Set 25 years after *Gears Of War 3*, The Coalition takes over development duties and brings the Xbox exclusive franchise into the current generation

Does the Xbox One's success rest on The Coalition's shoulders?

The Coalition has found itself in a difficult position. It's a new studio, comprised of veteran industry talent and fresh blood looking to make a mark in the current generation. Despite being handed the keys to one of the most recognisable (not to mention bankable) franchises in the world, the franchise itself could actually prove to be quite creatively limiting.

As *Gears Of War: Judgement* seemed to prove, the fans know what they want and what they like; any deviation from that is met with swift and severe negativity. That means that The Coalition has a responsibility to deliver a comfortable and visually familiar *Gears* campaign, one that long-time players will immediately connect with – even without powerhouse Marcus Fenix fronting the promotional material. Across its original trilogy, *Gears* maintained a consistent sales marker of 6 million copies sold, highlighting big impact but little growth. Microsoft will be eager to see this change, it will want *Gears Of War 4* to appeal to a new contingent of shooter fans on Xbox One, to become the killer exclusive that helps close the gap with the PlayStation 4. Whether an array of new enemies, weapons and characters stuffed expertly inside a familiar world are enough to achieve that goal remains to be seen – but we're eager to see the result.

"Gears of War 4 marks the beginning of an epic new saga for one of gaming's most celebrated franchises"

ADAM FLETCHER, THE COALITION



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: The Coalition
Release: 11 October 2016
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Beginning his career as a program manager at Microsoft in 1996, Rod Fergusson gained prominence when he joined Epic Games as an executive producer in 2005. After helping to steer one of Xbox's most famous franchises, Fergusson jumped ship to help get Irrational's *BioShock Infinite* out the door. He's now back at Microsoft, working with The Coalition on *Gears Of War 4*.

Developer History

Gears Of War **2006 [Xbox 360]**
Gears Of War 2 **2008 [Xbox 360]**
Gears Of War 3 **2011 [Xbox 360]**
BioShock Infinite **2013 [Xbox 360]**

High Point

After seven years with Epic Games, Rod Fergusson joined Irrational Games during the final stretch of development, to assist Ken Levine in tying up the loose ends to get *Infinite* shipped on time.

A NEW THREAT

■ WITH THE Lambent Pandemic over, a new enemy has emerged to terrorise the humans of Sera – many of whom are trapped inside walled off cities, bound by COG-imposed martial law. The Swarm. They bear a striking resemblance to the (now extinct) Locust, the bodies of which were dumped in mass graves – an act that new heroes JD, Kait and Del believe is responsible for the arrival of this new threat.



A WORLD CORRUPTED

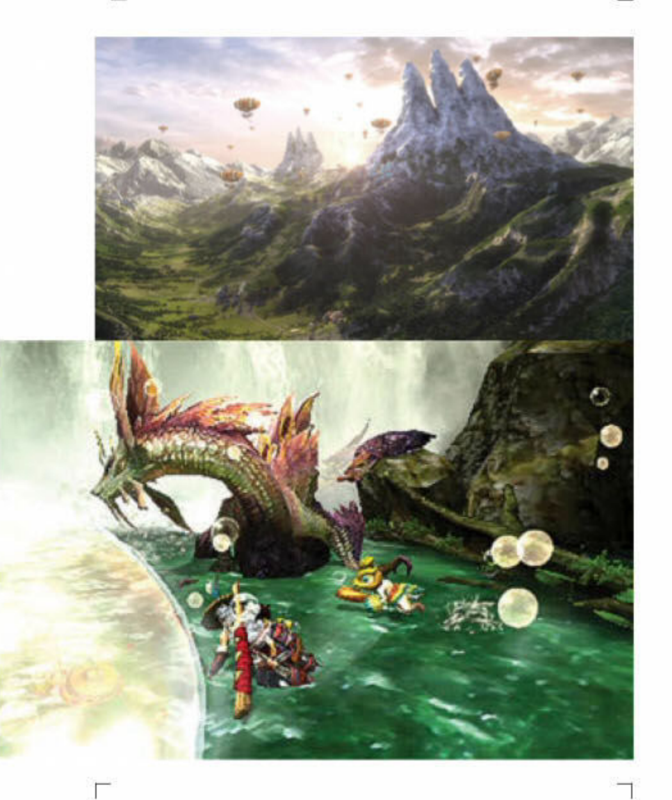
SET 25 years after the Imulsion Countermeasure weapon was deployed in *Gears Of War 3*, Sera has become a volatile landscape. The population of humans on the planet is dwindling, slowly reduced by the emergence of the Swarm and the advent of destructive Windflares – powerful storms that sweep in, altering the environments, conditions of battle and weapon effectiveness seemingly at random; as deadly as they are visually exciting.

IMPROVED GUNPLAY

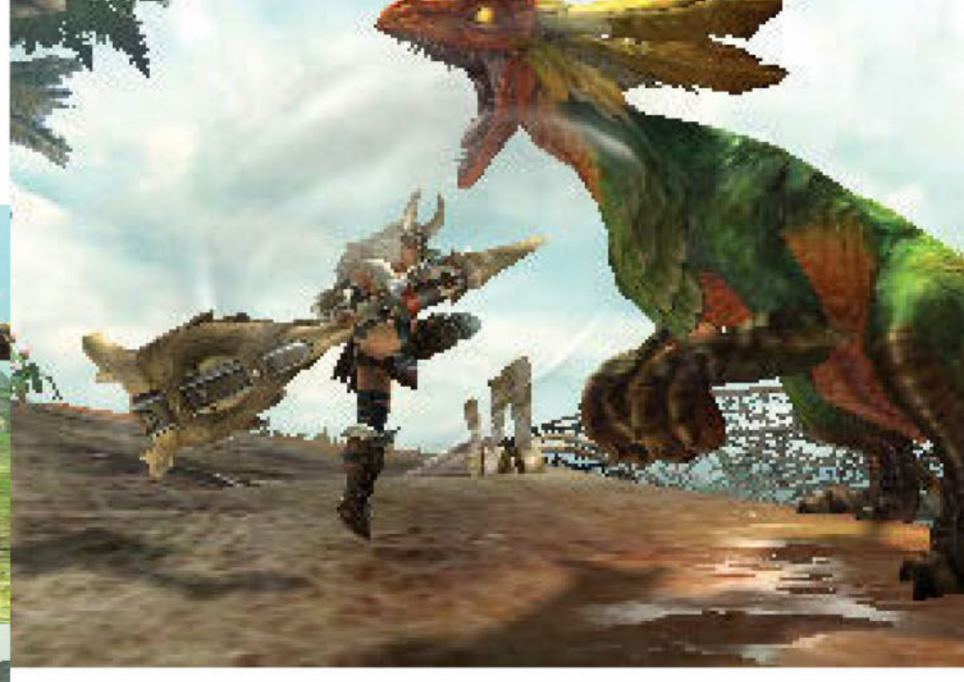
GEARS OF War 4 might be in production under a new studio – The Coalition was handed the licence following Microsoft's acquisition of it from Epic in 2014 – but the gameplay is comfortably familiar. From what we've played of *Gears* already, it's certainly tighter – the Unreal 4 Engine ensuring that the core pillars of the game remain while improvements to the weapons and cover system are introduced.



■ Above: The Great Maccao is the new entry-level bird wyvern and most likely one of the first large monsters you'll go after. Its bounding attacks and tail hops make it feel a bit like fighting Tigger in a dinosaur costume.



■ Above: Original monster design is generally excellent, with bubble-flinging leviathan Mizutsune being a beautiful but deadly highlight.



Monster Hunter Generations

CONCEPT ■ A greatest hits compilation of monsters, areas and characters from across the series, with a host of new beasts, mechanics and features and a lower barrier to entry

The Gathering Hall widens its search for new recruits

PS4 may, if Sony's marketing mantra is to be believed, be the best place to play, but nobody can deny that 3DS is the best place to *slay*. The new home of Capcom's insanely popular hunting series is Camp Nintendo, where it has been displaying clear improvements in terms of accessibility – something that this third western *Monster Hunter* release for the handheld is looking to take further still.

One major push towards being more accommodating of new players is Prowler mode, in which you leave your human hunter in the Gathering Hall to go off on quests as a playable Palico. Just as in *4U*, your furry friends can be customised with new gear and abilities, plus they offer multiple benefits for less experience hunters. For one, the usual three-strike mission failure criteria is alleviated by giving Prowlers acorns that let them recover twice per 'life', effectively giving them nine lives. In addition, the relatively simple move set spares newcomers the daunting task of having to decide which of the other 14 weapon archetypes to focus on, plus the removal of consumables (Prowlers rely purely on attacks and active skills) means inventory management is never a worry. Unlike hunters, Prowlers can also level up in a traditional manner, effectively allowing stumbling blocks to be overcome by grinding out XP on easier quests before returning to the former wall with better base stats. Multiplayer parties can be formed with any mix of hunters and Prowlers, which is a nice touch – underpowered players can instead take a Prowler into battle to support a team, or those trying to help friends through quests they cleared long ago can do so as a cat rather than in their overpowered gear.

> "With new gameplay mechanics and powerful Hunter Arts to equip, Monster Hunter Generations is the most customisable Monster Hunter experience yet"
>
> NINTENDO PRESS RELEASE

Hunters too have been afforded more tools to make their lives a little easier, most notably with the addition of Hunting Arts, powerful special abilities mapped to the touchscreen and used by tapping their icon when it is fully charged. Like a fighting game super, these gauges are filled by dealing damage or using other abilities and offer both powerful combo-ending barrages and utility skills (such as provoking a monster to buy time for your allies to heal or sharpen, or an emergency dodge with a significantly wider window of



DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

AFTER YEARS of playing *Monster Hunter* online, we're still baffled by how few people seem to actually understand how Armour Skills work. Granted, this isn't something that the game does a particularly great job of explaining but even so, it's not especially tough to work out. Basically, each armour piece grants a few points towards particular perks – at ten points total across all equipped gear, a perk is activated, with some offering greater benefits for hitting higher thresholds. A complete armour set from one creature will usually have enough points to trigger a couple of armour skills, although more advanced players can run the numbers and modify gear with gems to potentially get even better Skills out of a mixed set. And now you have no excuse for turning up Skill-free in our lobbies looking like a walking jumble sale...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Capcom
Release: 15 July (Japan: Out now)
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Son of Capcom CEO Kenzo Tsujimoto, producer Ryozo Tsujimoto has been in charge of the *Monster Hunter* franchise since *Freedom 2* on PSP, although he has actually been at Capcom since way back in 1996 and worked on the series in various roles since the first game. Under his supervision, the series has gone from strength to strength.

Developer History

Tech Romancer **1998 [Multi]**
Auto Modellista **2002 [Multi]**
Monster Hunter Freedom Unite **2008 [PSP]**
Monster Hunter Tri **2010 [Wii]**

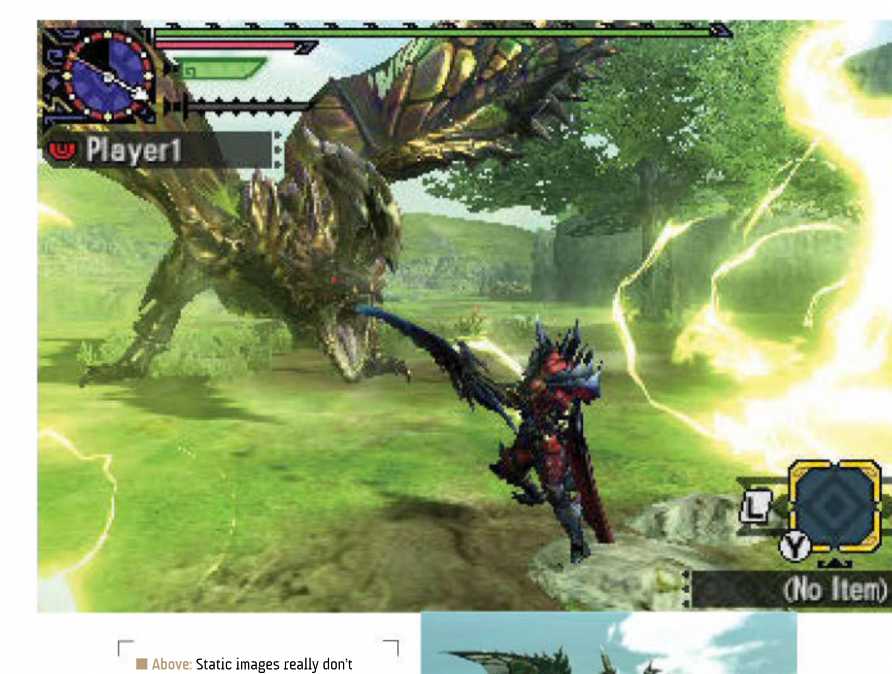
High Point

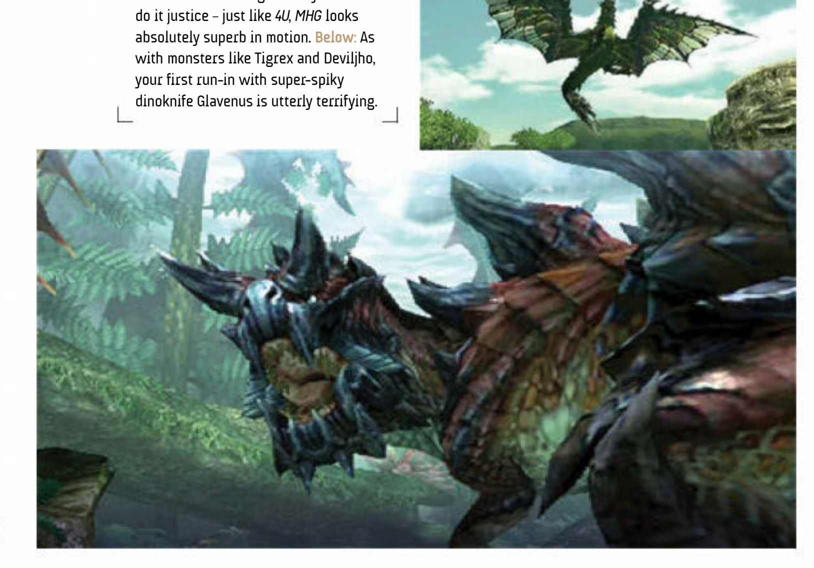
Both in terms of accessibility and content, the franchise continues to better itself with each iteration. As such, *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* rules for now, although *Generations* looks set to usurp it.

invulnerability), with both weapon-specific options and cross-class ones to choose from.

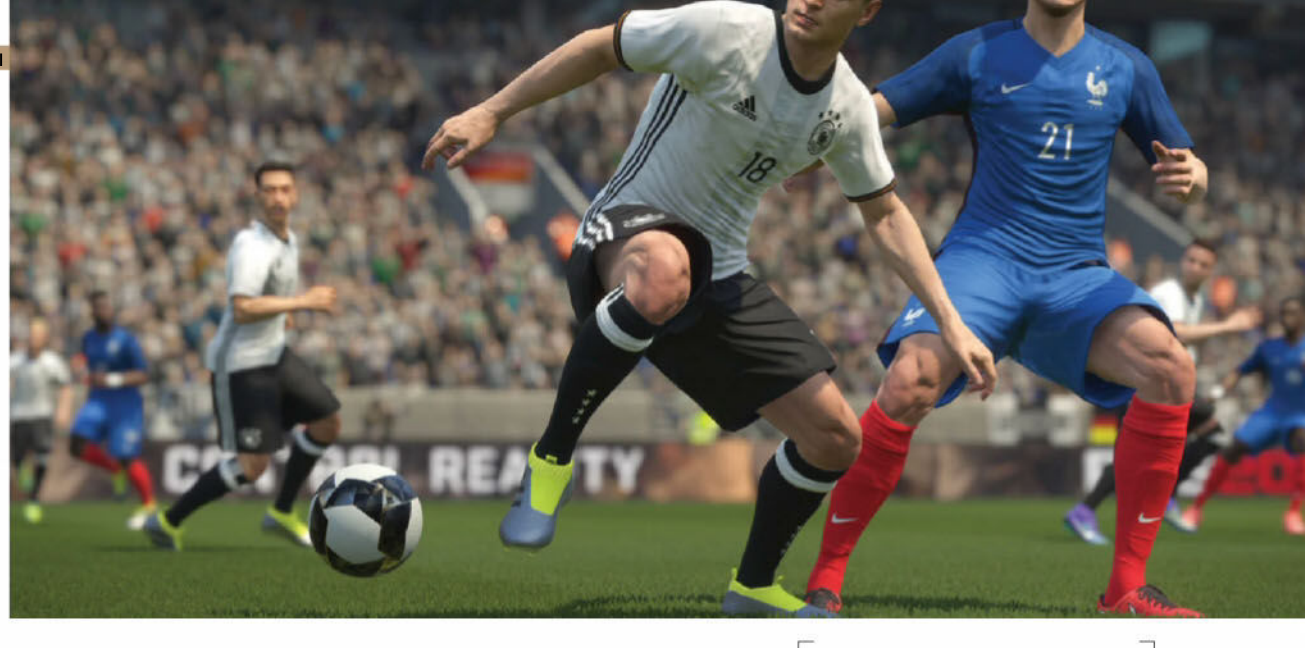
Style selection, conversely, appears at first to add an extra level of complexity, although this isn't really the case. Guild style plays almost exactly like *MH4U* in terms of weapon move sets, but the other options have their own intricacies to play around with: Striker, aimed more at novices, streamlines each weapon's attack pool while granting access to additional Hunting Arts (allowing three, rather than two, to be equipped at once); Aerial promotes high-flying play by turning your roll into a hop used to launch off monsters, enhancing air combat options and making mounting easier (sorry, Insect Glaive users... you are no longer special); Adept grants follow-up attacks after successful last-second evades, more in line with a character action game. The advantages of those last two come at a price – namely only offering a single Hunting Art slot – although experts will probably come to see the sacrifice as worthwhile, as the new skills offer vast tactical advantages in the right hands.

But what of the monsters? Well, between returning favourites like Nargacuga and Lagiacrus, curious call-ups for the likes of Tri oddities Nibelsnarf and Duramboros and all-new beasts – from an owl-like creature that inflicts status ailments to lumbering T-rex-alike Glavenus, which can sharpen its bladed tail with its teeth – it's safe to say that the line-up (which is roughly the same size as that of *MH4U*) is the most varied it has ever been, meaning that so too is the gear available by carving them all up. Even without G Rank missions, there should be no shortage of endgame potential, with extremely dangerous monster variants reserved for only the best players to challenge. And now, thanks to the push towards greater accessibility, more players than ever should feel like they're able to reach that once-elusive point. Also, playable cats. What's not to like?





■ Above: Static images really don't do it justice – just like *4U*, *MHG* looks absolutely superb in motion. Below: As with monsters like Tigrex and Deviljho, your first run-in with super-spiky dinoknife Glavenus is utterly terrifying.



Above: While we are yet to see MyClub or Master League in action, we find it unlikely the modes have seen any major UI overhauls; judging by how unintuitive it was to make a few substitutions, at any rate.

PES 2017

CONCEPT The sixteenth edition of *Pro Evolution Soccer* returns, known as *World Soccer: Winning Eleven* in Japan, offering an array of new features as Konami fights back against EA's years of league domination

Building on perfection

There's little question that *Pro Evolution Soccer* is more skilled and technically proficient than *FIFA* on the ball, but is it as fun? That's a difficult question to answer, largely because it depends entirely on what you're looking for from your annual interactive sports. *FIFA* continues to do its best to simulate the spectator sport experience, pumping funds into licensing, corporate branding and player likeness to capture the culture of football. *PES 2017*, on the other hand, is attempting to simulate the sport itself.

Last year's instalment was so good that it was difficult to find any reason to stay away from Konami Stadium; nothing has changed in this respect. *PES 2017* is a confident showing, even on an early playable build. The hundreds of new animations introduced into the game are immediately noticeable, with individual player traits and fluid styles of play are better replicated than before. It's a little overwhelming, seeing players shift their weight as they move the ball between their feet so accurately mimicking the real thing – but it isn't long before you appreciate the nuance to it all.

Below: *PES 2017* supposedly introduces adaptive AI, which learns to play as you do to better counter your attacks, though we didn't see any evidence of it working in our play session.

To support the new animations, PES Productions has also changed the ways in which you are able to shift around the pitch. Balls no longer latch onto feet as if by magic, with passes rocketing between players; timing and positioning are key. *PES 2017* is a more technically involved game than its official counterpart, and a missed chance or opportunity can quickly turn into a devastating counter-attack. The precise movement and extended control system only serves to make the end result feel all the more satisfying. It's still ridiculously entertaining to score a goal in *PES*. It still feels like you really earned it.

It feels like a real triumph to curl a ball in at a tight angle from 30 yards or work a precision one-two through the box, especially as the improved goalkeepers will only be beaten by the very best of shots. What isn't quite so spectacular, however, is the action that happens off the pitch. Unless the game gets a significant UI overhaul ahead of its Q3 2016 launch, it's likely we will be once again trapped with another clunky *PES* menu system and another unintuitive player management toolset.

It's a shame because that, coupled with the lack of licences, feels like all it is that's keeping *PES* tugging at *FIFA*'s shirt. As 2016's showing demonstrated, *PES* is now more than capable of holding its own against any rival. It has demonstrated unprecedented growth and strength – it's difficult to imagine that this won't be its best season yet – but a few core competencies continue to hold it back.

"For PES 2017 the visuals have seen a major upgrade, offering Authentic Visuals thanks to the further incorporation of Fox Engine"
PR KONAMI

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: PES Productions
Release: Q3 2016
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

PES Productions is a dedicated internal development team tasked with creating a beautiful simulation of football for next generation consoles using *Metal Gear Solid V*'s FOX engine. The studio, formerly known as Winning Eleven Productions, is split worldwide though the majority of the work is completed between Japanese and English offices.

Developer History

Pro Evolution Soccer 2013 **[Multi]**
PES 2014 **[Multi]**
PES 2015 **[Multi]**
PES 2016 **[Multi]**

High Point

After a few years of rebuilding its reputation, *PES 2016* proved that the long-running franchise was not only still relevant but capable of achieving greatness.



■ Left: Relic Entertainment has only confirmed three playable factions so far. Space Marines (as well as their various trooper guises) will be joined by the armies of the Eldar Empire and representatives of the all-powerful Orks.

"We're setting the bar for what we can achieve, and showing players what they can expect from us in the future. This is just the beginning"
JUSTIN DOWDESWELL, RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War III

CONCEPT ■ It's been seven long years, but Relic is bringing fabled real-time strategy franchise *Dawn Of War* back in 2017 for its third stand-alone title

Who knows their Orcs from their Orks?

"This is the *Dawn Of War* that fans have been waiting for," says Stephen MacDonald, *Dawn Of War III*'s executive producer. And he's correct, to an extent. Considering it's been seven years since the last fully-fledged sequel arrived, we'd argue that what the *Dawn Of War* fans have actually been waiting for is *any* game baring the legendary strategy franchise's branding.

But you aren't going to hear us complaining, because *Dawn Of War III* sounds like it's going to be genuinely worth the wait; merging core gameplay mechanics from both previous titles to create a 'best of' tour of galactic warfare. Relic Entertainment is aiming to combine the epic scale, base-building and huge armies of *Dawn Of War* with the customisation and elite heroes of its follow up. That alone should be enough to make you consider upgrading your PC ahead of the 2017 release – but it's the promise of even larger units, weaponry and scale will no doubt seal the deal. "Our biggest units ever? Check. Giant orbital lasers? Check. Base-building, epic heroes, huge battles, it's all in there," continues MacDonald, exuberantly. "Get ready for the biggest *Dawn Of War* yet. For the Emperor!"

There's that enthusiasm again. Honestly, it's great to see the studio exude such passion to the source material because there are perhaps no fans more dedicated than the carriers of *White Dwarf*, the nightly painters and the weekend warriors. But here's the great thing about *Dawn Of War*, while it's a killer opportunity to get into the lore of *Warhammer 40,000* universe, interest in Games Workshop just isn't necessary to enjoy yourself. *Dawn Of War* is a franchise that's known for its insane screen-dwarfing army assaults and ridiculous spectacle – and if you don't care about the differences between a Space Marine and a Chaos Marine that doesn't matter; it's basically just different armour permutations anyway.

From the hints dropped online and from poring over the official website and teases (we do it so you don't have to), *Dawn Of War III* could be a legitimate step-forward for the RTS genre. A huge campaign is coming back, and it even looks like *Homeworld*'s consistent armies – which let you build, customise and upgrade a force and carry it between encounters – will be returning, while the multiplayer component will likely feature an array of modes from co-operative play to huge team skirmishes.

Details are light – Sega is still ushering *Total War: Warhammer* out of the door, after all – but Relic Entertainment has pulled back the curtain just enough to get the hype machine whirring into action. If you're a fan of real-time strategy this needs to be on your wish list, regardless of whether you like *Warhammer 40K* or not.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

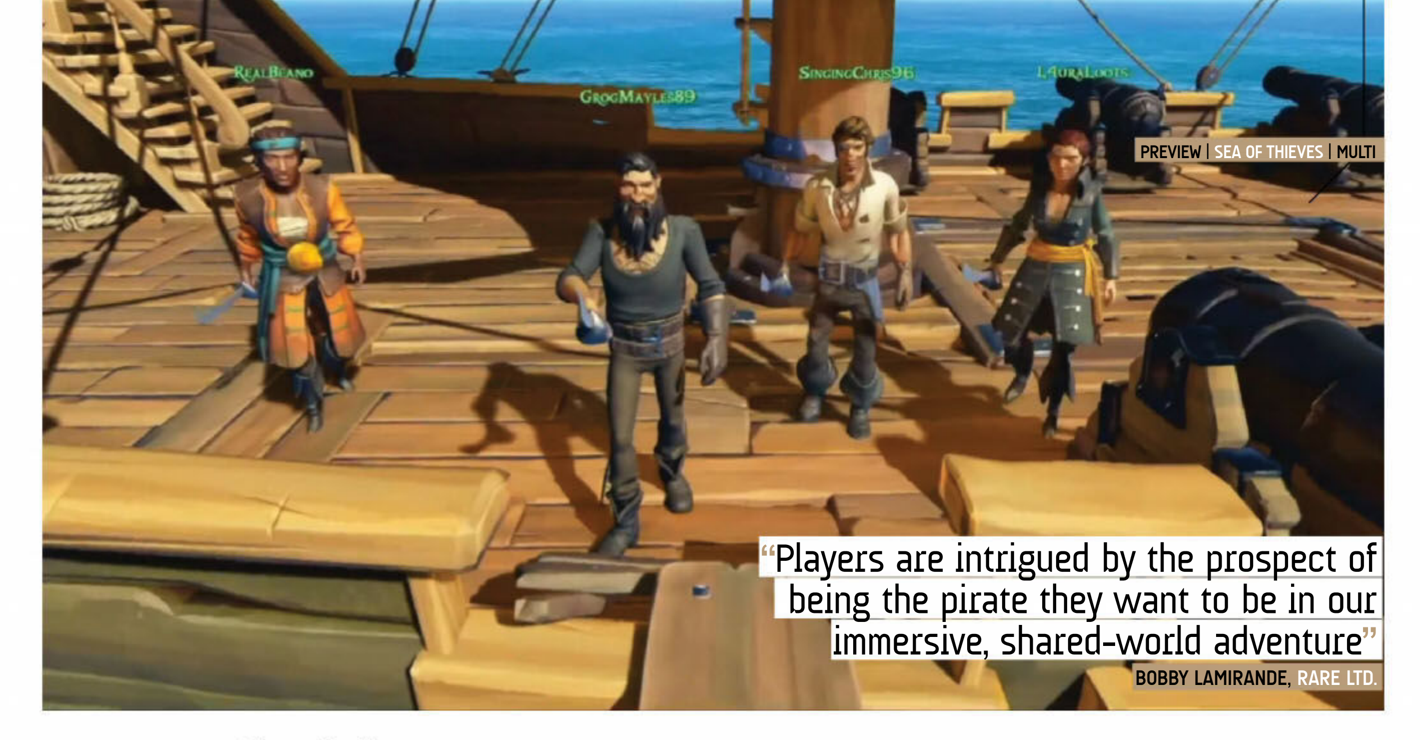
Founded back in 1997, Relic Entertainment is regarded as one of the finest developers the strategy genre has ever seen. The Canadian studio is responsible for the likes of *Dawn Of War* and *Company Of War* survived the fall of THQ in 2012 before being acquired by Sega.

Developer History

Homeworld **1999 [PC]**
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War **2004 [PC]**
Company Of Heroes **2006 [PC]**
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II **2009 [PC]**

High Point

Dawn Of War was huge for Relic back in 2004, delighting players with its huge scale battles and deeply intuitive combat and cover systems.



"Players are intrigued by the prospect of being the pirate they want to be in our immersive, shared-world adventure"

BOBBY LAMIRANDE, RARE LTD.

Sea of Thieves

CONCEPT ■ Join your friends for the adventure of a lifetime as you take to the tropical seas to fight pirates and plunder treasure, just be wary of everyone else in this innovative new shared-world game

Clear skies ahead

The notion that *Sea Of Thieves* could be the best game that Rare has ever made – as numerous Microsoft executives keep asserting – is starting to look less like a company line and more of a reality every week. The pirate-themed adventure was revealed at E3 2015 and it'll be the first all-new game from the legendary British studio that doesn't feature 'Kinect' in the title since *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* back in 2008. To be honest, we weren't even certain a team would still be in place that is capable of resurrecting one of its numerous old IPs, let alone create an all-new one.

Sea Of Thieves is being designed to take the shared world to a new plateau, a place where gamers are not only able to revel in the chaos of the open seas but make their own adventures with anybody that they might come across. It's a game that will thrive off player-generated emotional and memory-driven stories, and that means the studio has to make the world as engaging as possible.

From what we've seen so far, that shouldn't be a problem. Rare is already hard at work filling its vast world with plush tropical islands, daunting caves to be discovered and a huge helping of pirate ships and plunder to find and secure. You can take on *Sea Of Thieves* as a real pirate might, maintaining your ship and dropping anchor in the ports you stumble across, you can be an annoyance – hitting friends with fish while they try to barter deals with strangers – or you could just go rogue, steal a ship and introduce any would be aggressors to a cannonball before they even have a chance to start speaking to you.

But that's the (frankly surprising) majesty of *Sea Of Thieves*' design, it's taking an ambitious shared-world and pairing it with seemingly endless possibilities – it doesn't hurt that it looks graphically stunning either, the block blue skies and streaks of colour make it look like a delightful hangover from the Dreamcast-era. So *Sea Of Thieves* looks appealing for certain; now it's down to Rare to work out the particulars and actually pull it off.

Considering Rare has been out of the triple-A mainstream space for a while, you'd be right to approach *Sea Of Thieves* with trepidation. Lionhead was pushed and pulled in so many different directions that it was eventually left with a team that could only push forward with its games as a service model. Can Rare succeed without its hands tied by a peripheral cable? That's what we'll all be waiting to find out as *Sea Of Thieves* sails towards its intended Q4 2016 release window.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: Rare
Release: Q4 2016
Players: MMO

Developer Profile

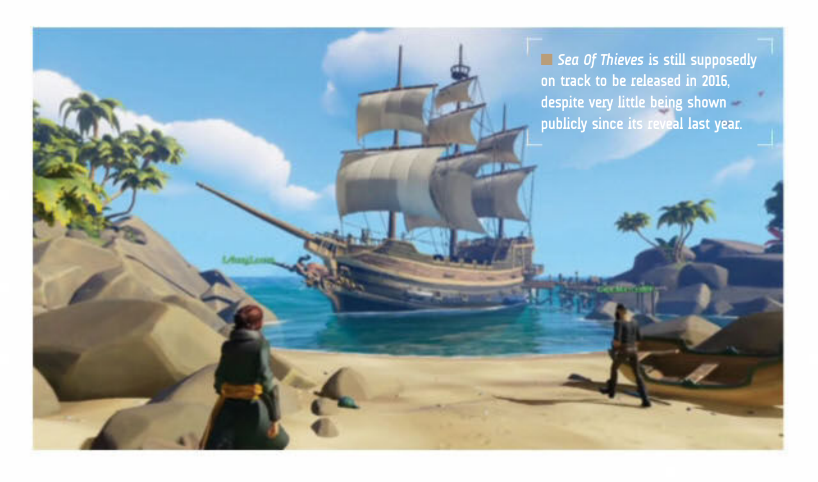
Rare is perhaps one of the best-known studios to ever emerge out of Britain. Established in 1985, it went on to create classics such as *GoldenEye 007*, *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Perfect Dark* with Nintendo, before being acquired by Microsoft in 2002.

Developer History

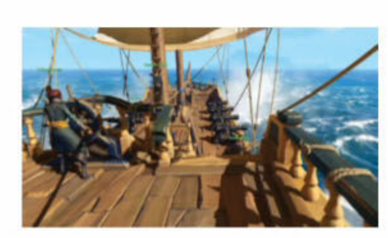
Donkey Kong Country **1996 [SNES]**
GoldenEye 007 **1997 [N64]**
Viva Piñata **2006 [Xbox 360]**

High Point

Created at the absolute last minute, *GoldenEye 007*'s multiplayer proved to be a defining moment in Rare's history, it was a must play experience for anybody with two controllers and an N64 in the 90s.



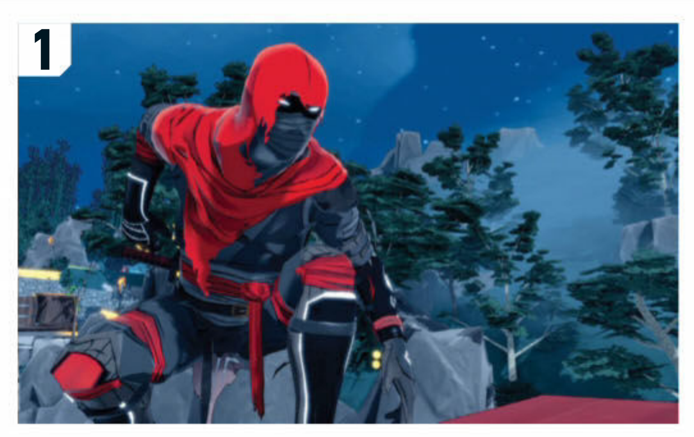
■ *Sea Of Thieves* is still supposedly on track to be released in 2016, despite very little being shown publicly since its reveal last year.





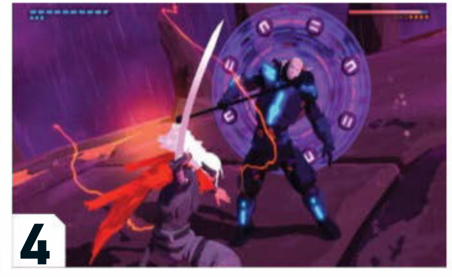
SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON


1


2


3


4


5

ARAGAMI

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Lince Works**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**

1 Reminding us rather pleasingly of *Tenchu*, this ninja assassin experience has a little more magic involved in it than Activision's classic stealth action game on PSone did, but that's no bad thing. Developer Lince Works has actually named *Okami*, *Sly Cooper* and *Journey* as artistic influences, which seems to have translated well to the game's final style. The magical element comes from you playing as an undead spirit who can control the shadows to stay hidden and summon all kinds of ghastly fiends to take out your enemies. There's some elements of *Dishonored* in how this all comes together too, if you ask us.

THE WILD EIGHT

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Eight Points**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA **December 2016**

2 Mixing co-op gameplay with survival, *The Wild Eight* is looking like a very promising new twist on the likes of *The Long Dark* and *Don't Starve* later this year. With eight survivors crawling from a plane crash, you get dropped into a co-op survival situation in a procedurally-generated wilderness that may or may not be the world as we know it. You can choose to play the game solo if you wish, but working with others is going to be the recommended way to survive, that is unless one of them turns out to be homicidally insane. Then, not so much. It's a nice concept with some promising ideas and a very cool art style, not to mention a haunting score.

MAXIMUM CAR

Format: **iOS, Android**
Publisher: **I Fight Bears, tea & cheese, Ancient Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **July TBC**

3 Inspired by *Burnout* and using the power of voxels to give it that physics driven insanity we all love, *Maximum Car* is the kind of racing game mobile devices have been screaming out for. It's a collaboration between *Fist Of Awesome* developer Nicoll Hunt and the guys behind *8-Bit Waterslide*. While the graphical style makes it look rather simple, the physics engine is looking excellent, and it's capturing the kind of intense action racing and crashes that made us fall in love with Criterion back in the day. Android and iOS releases are expected this summer with fingers crossed for the game landing on Steam in the not too distant future.

FURI

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **The Game Bakers**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

4 This is a pretty mad mash-up of genres that looks like it's actually going to tie together rather nicely. With elements of third-person melee combat, twin-stick action and bullet-hell shooters, *Furi* brings together a lot of interesting ideas in a bright, neon package. From the team at The Game Bakers that brought us the pretty excellent *Squids* titles and *Combo Crew* on mobile, this is an indie title we've been keeping a close eye on for some time. It looks fast-paced and very challenging, which is the kind of mix we enjoy from our action games when we can get it, as you duck between attacks, dash through walls of bullets and bring yourself in close enough to attack with your sword.

BEAT COP

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **11 Bit Studios**
Developer: **Pixel Crow**
ETA: **Q4 2016**

5 Inspired by 80s cop shows, the team at Pixel Crow set about making the kind of high-drama, high-stakes cop game that the *Miami Vice* crew would be proud of, only now with more parking violations and tickets for littering. You are, after all, a beat cop in this game, albeit one who has been framed for murder, dropped down from detective to street cop and left to dangle by his superiors. Can you survive the mob, your corrupt precinct and the hard streets of Brooklyn long enough to find out the truth? That's what this game will be asking you to do. Walk your patrol, do your job and try not to get yourself killed.



"I'm a real big believer in that everything is better as a shared experience"

ROD FERGUSSON, PRODUCER, BLACK TUSK STUDIOS



WHY I ♥... DIABLO II

ROD FERGUSSON, PRODUCER, BLACK TUSK STUDIOS

If we were to go all-time favourite, it would be **Diablo**, *as a series, actually. A lot of it for me is because of* **Diablo II** *and* **Lord Of Destruction**, *because of the co-op nature of it. I used to take these game breaks where I'd fly out to Winnipeg, where my brother lived, and we would just game for days straight and then I would fly home again. We did* **Diablo II** *and the expansion in three days without sleep. That notion of playing together in co-op... I'm a real big believer in that everything is better as a shared experience, and that's why I make the joke about that's why we get married – even life is better as a shared experience. I think maybe this is where I get some of my passion for co-op, and then that idea of playing with others and why I think it's so important for* **Gears**. *So much of those games is going back to moments and treasured memories of completing something with somebody else.*



OVER THE TOP

DICE TELLS US WHY THE FIRST WORLD WAR IS A PERFECT FIT FOR ITS BOLD NEW DIRECTION IN BATTLEFIELD 1

WORLD WAR ONE ISN'T THE PERIOD WE MIGHT HAVE CHOSEN TO PLAY HOST TO A FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER. It's not exactly an obvious choice. Developer DICE has, of course, been dismissive of that fact from the moment it unveiled *Battlefield 1*, an all-new FPS designed to celebrate 'the beautiful chaos of all-out war'. It's certainly evocative, designed in such a way that it could easily leave you hailing it as a turning point for the genre. But you've a right to be wary of the premise, because the gameplay demands of a fast-paced, team-based shooter – one with an emphasis on vehicular combat – seems to be inherently at odds with a setting that is most commonly associated with attrition.

When you think of the Great War, it's likely to conjure images of devastating operational paralysis, of battles on the Western Front and the implementation of ineffectual trench warfare. Technology played a huge part in this war; the horror of chemical warfare still resonates in public consciousness today, while dangerous working conditions would prove to be as deadly as the arrival of tanks, biplanes and battleships. On the surface, then, none of this sounds right for a big-budget blockbuster action game.

It's difficult to see where the "fun" side of WWI could emerge, especially one that needs to fit the remit of a 64-player shooter. The FPS genre traditionally looks to empower the player by offering them an immediate sense of progress and clear escalation of power. In this respect, WWI presents a number of problems for the designer doing »



> "It doesn't really look like WWI, does it? It looks more like Battlefield: Mad Max"

THINK YOU CAN SINK THIS BATTLESHIP?

ANATOMY OF THE HMS IRON DUKE

■ The dreadnaught-class HMS Iron Duke is one of the largest vehicles ever created in Battlefield's virtual spaces, it's going to take a co-ordinated effort to sink this battleship.

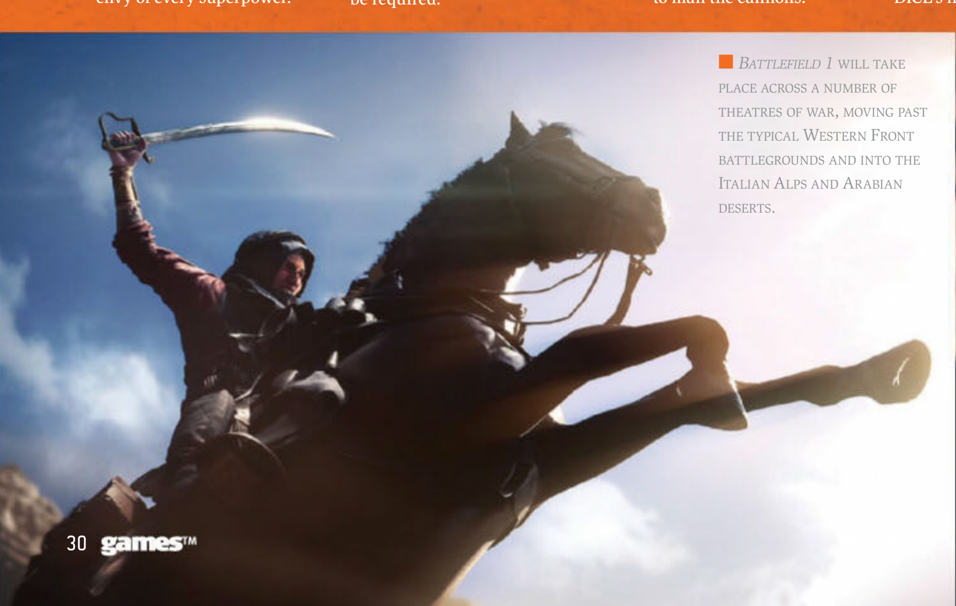
IMPOSING DESIGN
At 622ft in length, the Iron Duke was one of the first dreadnaught-class ships in service and it became the envy of every superpower.

TOUGH BREAKS
DICE has only teased what it'll take to bring this ship down, but it sounds like multiple runs from bomber planes and artillery will be required.

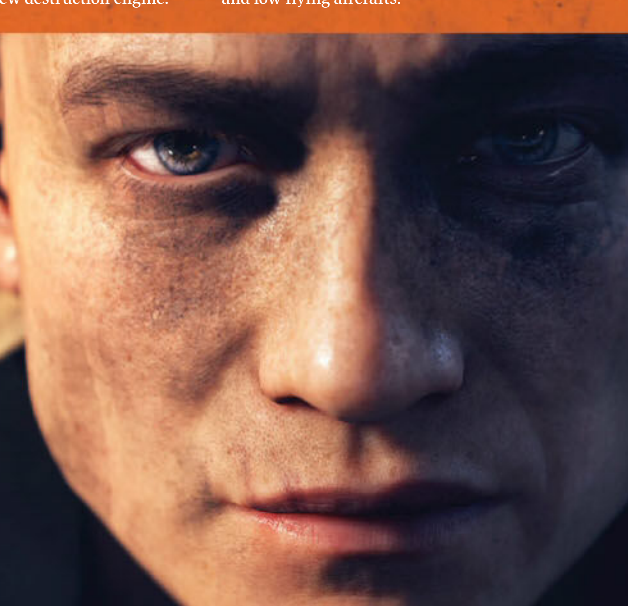
ON DECK
It'll take multiple soldiers to actually get this ship working at full capacity, with extra hands needed to man the cannons.

TOTAL DESTRUCTION
Should you get the HMS Iron Duke close enough to the coast, it is capable of wiping out entire sections of the map thanks to DICE's new destruction engine.

IMPOSSIBLE FIREPOWER
Iron Duke is armed with a battery of ten BL 13.5-inch Mk V naval guns, as well as smaller secondary battery designed to take on ships and low-flying aircrafts.



■ *Battlefield 1* will take place across a number of theatres of war, moving past the typical Western Front battlegrounds and into the Italian Alps and Arabian deserts.



their best to craft escapism, especially for an audience that's potentially more interested in killstreaks and progression systems than it is the Somme and Flanders.

By going back to 1914, DICE will need to either walk away from building digital conflicts around authenticity or prepare to have questions asked of its intentions. Clearly, *Battlefield 1* is taking liberties with historical accuracy in an effort to build a sense of perceived realism. That is to say that while DICE will be making use of the war's weaponry, uniforms and theatres of war, it's aiming to extract those elements out of their gritty context and push them into a 'safe for play' environment. The studio is eager to engage us in the "genesis of modern warfare" and it wants to do it as far removed from any responsibility to the history it is drawing from as possible.

OVER THE TOP

"I think there's no question that WWI was one of the bloodiest conflicts ever fought, it was the dawn of all out war – where the old world meets the new one, it was crazy," considers Andreas Morell, *Battlefield 1*'s multiplayer producer, in an interview with **games™**. And indeed it was "crazy"; it was a conflict that saw the tactics of the 19th Century clash violently with the emerging technologies of the 20th to great loss.

A shooter that makes any valiant attempt to be faithful to the realities of WWI would be slow, tactically dense and unquestionably claustrophobic. You'd expect a game making use of the locales, assets and technological horrors of the war for entertainment purposes to be more *Silent Hill* than a bombastic shooter; this is the reality of the setting chosen by DICE, but it doesn't fit with the mechanical language of *Battlefield*. It begs the questions: why this era?

Perhaps it is because DICE has reached an impasse of sorts with *Battlefield*. In the fourteen years since the franchise first debuted with *Battlefield 1942*, the series has served multiple tours of duty in WWII, trudged through Vietnam, investigated modern conflicts and even taken a short trip into the future. It even took on America's relentless war on drugs with *Hardline*; it perhaps wouldn't be unfair to suggest that the series has arrived in 1914 out of necessity rather than curiosity.

The developers at DICE are quickly running out of conflicts that would appropriately service the scale and scope of *Battlefield*'s traditional gameplay loop, and judging by the volatile reaction to Activision's *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, dusting off the history books for inspiration seems like a wise decision. Not only does the setting immediately set *Battlefield* apart from the slew of shiny, space-set first-person shooters arriving in the next 12 months, it also helps separate it from EA's own *Star Wars: Battlefront* and *Titanfall 2*.

"We are taking a different route from the other [FPS] games," says Morell. "Going back to the dawn of all-out warfare really is a perfect fit for *Battlefield*. The epic scale, the immersion we can [provide], the journey that we can show our players, the universe that existed back then… you're going to go to places that you wouldn't even believe [soldiers] were fighting. It's the classic *Battlefield* multiplayer sandbox at its best… it's going to give you all of those 'only in *Battlefield* moments' that are so unique and spectacular."



Zeppelins were a show of force in World War I. While they lacked solid offensive capabilities, they swiftly crushed morale. The same goes in *Battlefield 1*; the last thing you'll likely want to see is a Zeppelin appearing on the horizon as you're trying to secure an objective.

And yet we're still curious about *Battlefield 1*'s use of the Great War as a backdrop for its chaos – it could quite easily have used an alternate history setting to realise its gameplay intentions – but Morell isn't wrong: *Battlefield 1* does look spectacular. In spite of being over a century removed from its competition in setting, *Battlefield 1* looks more modern than its FPS rivals. There's something almost otherworldly to its visual design, as if the soldiers and the war that surrounds them had been summoned from a fantastical *Elseworlds* story. But they aren't, they are echoes of a real world 1914 draped in *Battlefield*'s evocative oranges and blues – elements of an old war transformed into something fresh-faced and immediate.

BATTLEFIELD IN ACTION

"The misconceptions around this era is that [WWI] was just set on the Western Front in trenches – fighting with ancient equipment – but when you really start digging into it you find that that is so not true," explains Morell. "It's a really interesting era for us. Everybody over here at DICE has gone on a journey to understand what this [setting] means for *Battlefield*. The more we got into our research over the years, the more we realised that this is the perfect fit."

"Especially with multiplayer, we are going to really show off this truly global war with all the different locations that we have – from the high Alps of Italy and of course the Western Front. And then there's the weaponry, they had shotguns, they had automatic rifles, and they had pistols and bolt-action sniper rifles. The things that you see on the battlefield from 1914 to 1918 are essentially the first iteration of what has been used in combat even today; this is where it all started," he says, adding, "ultimately it's all there. We want to portray it accurately but ultimately it's a game. It needs to be *Battlefield* and it needs to fit all the pillars that all our fans know and love."

Battlefield 1 does look pretty incredible, even at this early pre-alpha stage. The scale is truly impressive; the action stretches off far into the distance, a testament to the skill developers now exhibit over the current generation technology. The moment-to-moment action is visceral and chaotic. *Battlefield 1* seems to combine the speed of *Battlefield Hardline* with the scale and precision »

CLASS WARFARE

HOW ROLES ARE CHANGING IN BATTLEFIELD 1

ASSAULT

The fiercest action has always been on the frontlines in *Battlefield* and that's no different here. The Assault kit comes equipped anti-vehicle weaponry and explosives designed to aid you in disabling enemy armour and disrupting defensive lines.

MEDIC

Those with a penchant for healing and reviving their brothers in arms will want to take up the role of Medic, which has been separated from the Assault kit – the first time this has happened since *Bad Company 2*.

SUPPORT

Suppression and flank tactics are more integral than ever in the larger spaces of *Battlefield 1*'s theatres of war. The Support kit lets a soldier have access to light machine guns and gives them the opportunity to resupply ammunition.

SCOUT

With an emphasis on destructible landscapes and trench warfare, engaging enemies at long range will be in high demand. The Scout kit will give you plenty of opportunities to prove that camping *is* a legitimate strategy.

TANK OFFICER

Vehicle classes are a new addition to *Battlefield* and, with the Engineer kit cut from the experience entirely, it's likely this new role will give you the ability to repair ordinance should it become damaged in an assault.

PILOT

DICE is yet to detail this second vehicle class, but given that some of the most infamous stories of World War I centred around the exploits of pilots, it's likely this Kit will improve your manoeuvrability and tenacity in the air.



"We aren't depicting the horrendous war stories. It's an entertainment product, we are making a game"

of *Battlefield 4* – the unhinged destructibility of *Bad Company 2* there to sweeten the deal. *Battlefield 1* is still structured around the "rock-paper-scissors" balance that franchise is known for, where victory is reserved for those who assess the opportunities at hand to take on threats across land, air and sea. Considering the size and variety of the battlefields, DICE wants us to start thinking about how we operate in battle at a macro level. Simply linking up with a Squad and playing the objective isn't enough any more; instead you need to be aware of your surroundings and switch classes dutifully to assist with the frontline surge.

The Engineer class from *Battlefield 3* and *4* is gone, their equipment split between Assault and Support – it would have been a little anachronistic for the setting to see a soldier running around with a carbine in one hand and a rocket launcher in the other. The dedicated Medic class has been reintroduced; those with a penchant for supportive healing will finally have an opportunity to gain a foothold on the leaderboards. Dedicated vehicle classes are being introduced for the first time and, from what we've seen behind closed doors, this will impact your survivability while in the driver or gunner seats of everything from heavy tanks to aerial bombers.

Some tanks will be suitable for multiple passengers – who are needed to control the fixed main or side guns depending on the model you hop into – while certain aerial vehicles will require a gunner to take charge of the old MG bolted on to the back of it. We've already seen gorgeous red triplanes twirl and dip through the air (with far more manoeuvrability than their real-life counterparts), drawing parallels with the Red Baron and his famous Flying Circus squadron fighting over the Western Front back in 1917. Air combat looks quick; surprisingly so, in fact, as you consider that your average Bristol F.2 Fighter would top out at 125mph – a sharp departure from the blistering 1,180mph that you're used to experiencing from *Battlefield 4*'s F35.

On the seas, we've even witnessed a Dreadnaught Class HMS Iron Duke battleship – the crown jewel of the Royal Navy – laying waste to shorelines. While the studio wouldn't budge on the implications of such large vehicles – the largest it has ever created – it will clearly have an impact on the development of the environments around you. Whether *Battlefield 1* would include Levolutions – destruction wrenched from the player's hands directly – or whether it would return to *Bad Company*'s 'destroy-what-you-want' insanity seems up in the air. Though a tester mentioned at a behind-closed doors presentation that *Battlefield 1* in its current state featured '*too much* destruction' and needs to be tweaked ahead of launch as the maps transformed into coverless death traps by the end of rounds. We'd wager that DICE is leaning towards the *Bad Company* model then, which is fine by us in terms of gameplay.



HISTORICAL ACCURACY

In short, we've never quite seen a World War-set shooter look quite this good, or – dare we say it – this *modern*. That of course shines a light on an array of problems with the concept and subsequent execution. *Battlefield 1* is taking sweeping creative liberties with the era it's set in, to the point where the longer you explore it, the less it resembles the battles it is drawing inspiration from. *Battlefield 1* might use the right gun names and sounds, but it's really looking to replicate the surface elements of the conflict it is drawing its identity from, not the atmosphere or reality of it. That probably wouldn't be much fun.

"It doesn't really look like WWI, does it?" laughs historian and author Rob Schäfer as we ask for his initial thoughts on the game. As an expert on German warfare through the First and Second World Wars (not to mention a fan of the *Battlefield* franchise), we were eager to get his perspective. "It looks more like *Battlefield: Mad Max*."

"*Battlefield* can work [in WW1] yes, but at the cost of historical accuracy," he considered as we discussed authenticity, or the lack thereof. "I think we will have massively fast Mark IV tanks, we will have lots of spades, axes and clubs, and everyone seems to be wearing trench armour from what I saw in the trailer. But yes, why not?" he says, adding, "I just hope that it will be a bit slower than the previous games… [otherwise] it won't be a World War One shooter."

Schäfer points out a number of issues. While *Battlefield* may have prided itself on replicating weapons and attachments in previous instalments, it doesn't sound possible here. "I don't think [weapons] will handle like the originals though, because it will be a *massively* slow game," he says, while also noting that the traditional progression system will either need to change dramatically or betray the era. "I'm also quite interested to see what they do if there is an upgrade or reward system, what do you get? There are no improvements, so I just wonder what it will be like – there isn't a huge choice of automatic weapons."

A real sticking point for Schäfer, though, was the thought of "hordes of players wearing trench armour and wielding clubs and axes," which surprised us, as DICE has also put a strong emphasis in its early promotional campaign on its revised melee system to better echo the combat of the time. Melee weapons weren't as widespread, Schäfer asserts, as we may have been led to believe.

"In the German army [trench clubs] were first issued to very specialised assault troops from 1917 onwards. Even daggers were hardly seen; in the German army only two were issued per company, so you only had two proper close-combat daggers issued between 150 men," he says, also noting that many of the armour variations in the trailer would have been ineffectual in actual combat. "The stuff »

■ If you were concerned that DICE was still chasing the ghost of *Modern Warfare*'s success, you'll be happy to learn it's putting all of its focus on all-out war.

existed, but it wasn't used as it is depicted here... stuff like [the armour and melee weapons] is a bit, well it might look cool but it certainly didn't happen."

To DICE's credit, it does seem to be aware of these historical inaccuracies in *Battlefield 1*, but when pushed on how the studio is going to make authenticity work for the game, Morell has much the same answer as he did when we questioned the appropriateness of using the conflict in the first place: "The way we approached it is if it adds to the game – and it makes the game better – then it should go in there. It's *Battlefield* and it's a game first." That's largely true, and it's a fine-looking game at that, but if DICE is ignoring some of the realities of WWI combat, then why did it select it for *Battlefield*?

RAISING LARGER QUESTIONS

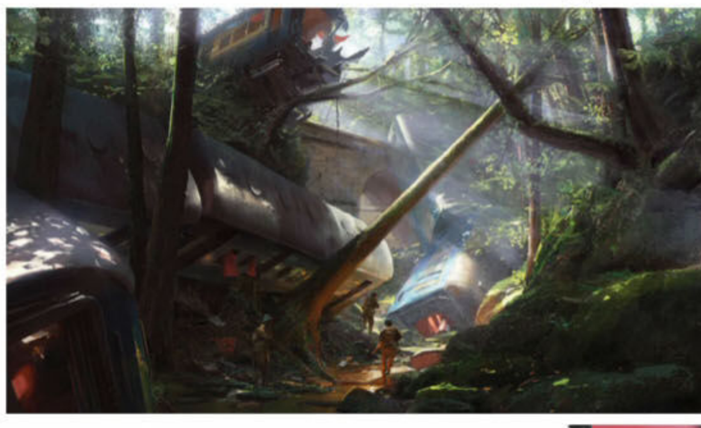
Most shooters aren't interested in telling serious war stories – nor should they have to be. Most developers can create entertainment-driven experiences that rely on the horrors of war without actually depicting them, and a game set in this period was always going to overlook elements such as trench warfare out of necessity. What DICE is doing with *Battlefield 1* isn't wrong, necessarily; as a multiplayer game it requires large-scale, explosive battles. But there's something unsettling about DICE grabbing the imagery of WWI and leaving the rest behind, that it might not acknowledge the sensitive scenarios it has chosen to display.

When questioned as to whether players will be able to wield chemical weapons (as glimpsed in early footage) as grenades, Morell would only say "at this stage we aren't going to go into specific items and gadgets." When questioned directly about whether it was appropriate to set a game in WWI the response was limited. "It's a game," Morell says, again. "We aren't depicting the horrendous war stories... It's an entertainment product, we are making a game." That's true, of course, but chemical weapons – such as chlorine and mustard gas – are one of the true horror stories of the last century. Are we, perhaps, being too sensitive?

> "PEOPLE SUFFERED AND WERE IN TERRIBLE PAIN – BUT ONLY A VERY TINY NUMBER OF SOLDIERS DIED FROM GAS"

To answer this, we have to turn back to our history expert, who understands the reality of this conflict better than **games™** or DICE. "Looking at it from our perspective today, it is definitely nothing that should be done today. But these games are about 'killing', so I personally see no difference if you vaporise someone with a panzerfäuste or if you gas him," says Schäfer. "It appears to us that it was horrible – and it obviously was, people suffered and were in terrible pain – but only a very tiny number of soldiers died from gas. Gas had a huge psychological effect, but the main killer in World War 1 was artillery. About 80 per cent of the casualties on the battlefield were inflicted by artillery: shrapnel, splinters, high explosives." And it's true, the killing capacity of gas is thought to have been limited to less than four percent of combat deaths before it was banned. This is a perception that will carry on until people are more educated, and perhaps *Battlefield 1,* in its way, can open up a dialogue about the subject for a new generation. The use of chemical weapons is an iconic piece of WWI history – "if you have the First World War, you can hardly have it without poison gas," says Schäfer.

Much of our understanding of WWI is based upon the trench warfare of Europe, but this global conflict had a lot more going on than that and *Battlefield 1* will be depicting it all.



WWII has been largely appropriated, deemed acceptable, as a setting for all manner of videogames – shooters such as *Call Of Duty* and *Brothers In Arms* alongside action-adventures like *The Saboteur* – but even they know and accept their limitations in terms of material to draw from. Look back to 2014's *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, a game that took its ridiculous action to an alternative history where Nazis won the war, it drew considerable criticism over its handling of holocaust imagery – whether it even belonged in the game to begin with is still argued to this day.

Many aspects of WWII have been simplified and (in some examples) trivialised by Hollywood and videogames. We fight the good fight alongside allies, we defeat the evil Nazis, and return home a hero; that's your classic WWII story – it's become a playground for videogame action. WWI hasn't been given this treatment. It fails to offer a clear-cut narrative of heroes and villains, instead its driving force is focused around a complex mess of old-world alliances struggling to adapt to the 20th Century.

Ultimately, *Battlefield 1*'s gameplay looks exhilarating and vibrant, but it's set in and around a war of exhaustion. The deadlock that we saw in 1914-18 has been punctured by sizzling dogfights and an array of improved replica weaponry that betrays reality. *Battlefield 1* takes advantage of the imagery of WWI – the guns, the soldiers and the settings – but can/should it capture the darker side?

The First World War retains a strange position in the public consciousness, and that means *Battlefield 1* has raised some larger questions of the use of war as entertainment in videogames. For the most part, WWI has avoided interactive recreation – aside from a handful of flight simulators and turn-based tactical war games – and the success of *Battlefield 1* would likely bring about a change in that. If it's playing fast and loose with the realities of the conflict, it loses the opportunity to educate, which would be a great shame. Still, if the thought of DICE letting players run riot through some of the bloodiest warzones in human history makes you uncomfortable, it may be worth asking yourself: considering the talent and energy in the team at DICE right now, is there a development team you would trust more to bring this war to life? DICE has given itself a challenge, but one it can rise to.



Every Fokker Dr.1 we've seen in flight seems to be coated in bright paint, the visual identifier of the Red Baron and his Flying Circus squadron. DICE wouldn't confirm whether Manfred von Richthofen would make an appearance or whether it's just creatively capturing the essence of the Western Front.





CAN BATTLEFIELD 1 EDUCATE US?

THE FIRST WORLD War isn't covered by media and educators in the same depth that would typically be applied to the conflicts that would soon follow. But we learn about the past in strange and different ways, and *Battlefield 1* is an opportunity to open up a side of history to an audience that is likely more interested in interactive experiences than it is sitting down with the collective works of Erich Remarque, Wilfred Owen, R.C, Sherriff and Ernest Hemingway.

"What I also like about *Battlefield 1* is that it gives you this perspective of global warfare," Rob Schäfer tells **games™** as the historian digests the early footage. "Which is nice in a way because it may also prove to be a bit educational; so people know that the First World War wasn't just France, or Flanders or the Somme. It goes to Russia, the Middle-East, and Egypt."

We've questioned the appropriateness of *Battlefield 1* and judging by the community feedback we've gathered it seems a lot of you also feel uneasy about the premise. But for Schäfer, a German historian, he questions whether this is in fact a reflection of Britain's cultural perception of the Great War.

"I find the debate that is currently raging in England very interesting," says Schäfer, noting that he has spoken with many of his colleagues across Europe to get their take on *Battlefield 1*. "I think the reason you might be questioning the appropriateness is because WWI is the British national catastrophe. It is not the German national catastrophe, nor is it the Russian, the Dutch or the Belgian national catastrophe. I think people in Britain still very much feel and identify with the fallout of the First World War. One of the major reasons for that is that, in the last 20 years, it has been heavily romanticised."

And it's true, to a degree. As Schäfer puts it, the war is remembered through "the relentless poetry and 'those brave boys going over the top to fight for our freedom' and stuff like that." A lot of our understanding of that war, at a general level, is through these storytellers, a lot of which skews the facts. To his credit, he doesn't "have a problem with the morale of it all... personally, I do not see any difference if I shoot digital Vietcong or digital Waffen-SS."

We are right to question the appropriateness of course, WWI is an odd setting for such an explosive and bombastic videogame. But it's worth remembering that WWI is, compared to WWII, a relative mystery to many, and it's important to educate yourself on the conflict before writing the game off entirely. As Schäfer says, "Personally, I think that if there is a chance that it can get young people interested in that period of history I'm perfectly fine with it," and we're inclined to agree.



15 WAYS INFINITE WARFARE COULD BE THE MOST AMBITIOUS PACKAGE EVER

Developer: Infinity Ward **Release date:** 4 November 2016 **Format:** PS4, Xbox One, PC

Infinity Ward is back in command of *Call Of Duty*. The studio isn't merely flirting with the future in *Infinite Warfare*, it's grabbing gamers by the throat and dragging them kicking and screaming into a science fiction-fuelled intergalactic civil war. It's been all too easy to jump on the hate train for *Infinite Warfare* – familiarity does breed contempt, after all – but look beyond the whining and you'll see that this might just be the most ambitious *Call Of Duty* yet.

ONLY ON CURRENT-GEN
INFINITE WARFARE WON'T BE RELEASING ON XBOX 360 AND PS3 – IT'LL ONLY BE AVAILABLE FOR CURRENT-GEN SYSTEMS

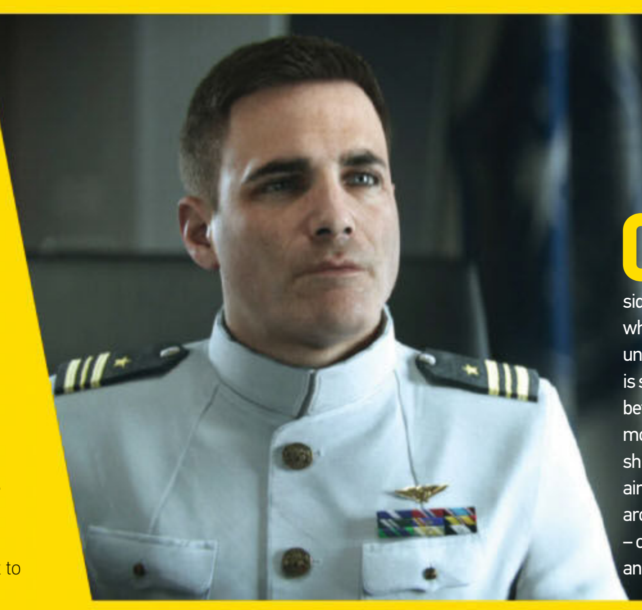


RIDICULOUS SCOPE

01 Ever since Infinity Ward first injected *Call Of Duty* with scenes of impressive cinematography and spectacular setpieces, it's become a franchise defined by conflict escalation. Every *Call Of Duty* has to be bigger, louder and more explosive than the last; *Infinite Warfare* is no exception to this unwritten Activision rule. It's putting players on the frontlines of a futuristic battle for survival, taking the firefights out of claustrophobic corridors and sprinkling them across a galaxy at war. Infinity Ward toyed with space-set missions in its last game – 2013's *Ghosts* – but *Infinite Warfare* will be the first to truly let you revel in the depths of our solar system.

EXCITING STORY

02 *Infinite Warfare* is a new branch on the *Call Of Duty* family tree, introducing a fresh universe, story and cast of characters. Infinity Ward has always been the best of the bunch at weaving a cohesive and engaging narrative through its games in the past and we'd expect nothing less from *Infinite Warfare*. This battle is framed around the nations of Earth unifying in an attempt to colonise the solar system. What the United Nations Space Alliance didn't expect – and it really should have, to be honest – is that one of the fringe colonies would go rogue, call themselves something like the Settlement Defence Front and attempt to destroy everything.



CENTRAL COMMAND

05 Your warship, the Retribution, will act as a central hub. It's here that you'll be able to navigate between missions, take on side-quests and even explore various destinations – which will reportedly evolve and change as the story unfolds. This central hub ensures *Infinite Warfare* is structured like no *Call Of Duty* you've ever played before and it'll even have impact on the moment-to-moment action. You'll be able to set raids on enemy ships from the captain's seat, clamber out of the airlock and engage in zero-G gunfights – zipping around the exterior of the ship with a grappling hook – or jump straight into your fighter jet, the Jackal, and dive into dogfights seamlessly. »

EXTENDED DEVELOPMENT

03 This will be the first time that Infinity Ward has had the opportunity to enjoy a three-year development cycle. The team has been hard at work on *Infinite Warfare* while Sledgehammer hammered out *Advanced Warfare* and Treyarch finished up *Black Ops III*. Perhaps that's why the new game looks so ambitious, as new design director Jacob Minkoff – ex-Naughty Dog lead game designer for *Uncharted 3* and *The Last Of Us* – has had ample opportunity to make an impact. We can only hope this year also sees a major overhaul of the IW engine though, *Ghosts* ran on IW 6.0 and the cracks were beginning to show.

MORE CONTROL

04 Bored of playing the pawn in *COD*? *Infinite Warfare* will actually put you in command, not of a small team, but of an entire Earth defence force. You'll assume the role of Captain Reyes, a Tier 1 Special Operations pilot who takes on the responsibility of defending humanity against a seemingly relentless enemy threat. Infinity Ward is eager to explore the weight and consequence of leadership, but we're just happy to hear that the story won't play out in cutscenes; instead you'll actually direct operations from the helm of a gigantic UNSA warship.

NO LOAD SCREENS

06 Activision is adamantly reporting that *Infinite Warfare* won't feature loading screens. This all ties into this focus on seamless action that Infinity Ward is pushing towards, as you have the opportunity to move between various fields of battle without the worry of exposition being forced on you as you sit through yet another cutscene. Infinity Ward has detailed a few examples of this, though the most exciting surround the possibilities of moving from Earth and its regular duck-and-cover gunplay, straight into atmosphere or zero-G dog-fighting in your Jackal. Even moving between the halls of the Retribution and immediately into zero-G gunfights outside of it, it all sounds very impressive.

NEW GAMEPLAY

07 With the lines becoming blurred between *Call Of Duty* and its competitors, Infinity Ward will be looking to ensure *Infinite Warfare* is the most sensational of the lot. New movement systems have been promised – the return of jetpack-assisted strafing is almost a given – but we're really eager to see how zero-G space battles are handled. The dogfights from the cockpit of your Jackal seem to be surprisingly off-rails, a rarity for vehicle sections in *Call Of Duty*, while the gunfights themselves seem more violent than ever as you crack enemy oxygen tanks and space suits.

SIDE-MISSIONS

09 *Call Of Duty* has, traditionally, been all about funnelling you down the most explosive path as quickly as it possible can. That's going to change this year as *Infinite Warfare* offers players the opportunity to engage in side-quests. They provide you with the opportunity to discover optional story elements, as well as items to help make your next mission a little easier, like improved Intel, weapons and loot. All of these missions can be accessed from the Retribution, so you'll be able to decide whether you want to dive deeper into the game or stick to the critical path for that classic *Call Of Duty* experience.





CUSTOMISABLE SHIPS

08 To match the seamless gameplay elements, *Infinite Warfare* will also introduce persistent aspects to the gameplay that we haven't seen in *Call Of Duty* before. So not only will you be able to alter and tweak your loadouts, not to mention your mission preparedness, but you'll also be able to customise and upgrade your fighter jet, the Jackal. Infinity Ward is eager to convey that you're in command, that you have control over the direction of this war – this isn't a multi-protagonist game like we've seen in the past, but one where your experiences can affect the gameplay.

SPACE ZOMBIES

10 Against all odds, the zombie co-operative mode has become one of the biggest talking points of the *Call Of Duty* experience every year. Perhaps it's because it offers something challenging, something fresh alongside the standard array of twitch or your missed it gunplay of the multiplayer. Infinity Ward is going to offer an all-new take on zombies, bringing a new universe and story into the fold that takes advantage of *Infinite Warfare*'s unique movement system, as well as gameplay features and mechanics that are separate from the base multiplayer game. Basically, expect to be fighting zombies in space come November 2016.



CRAZY SCENARIOS

11 Infinity Ward is of course keeping story details close to its chest in an effort to avoid spoilers, but some of the mission examples it *has* detailed sound wildly different to your standard move from Point A to Point B gauntlet of gunfire that we've come to know from *Call Of Duty.* Not only will *Infinite Warfare* take us to intense battles on Earth and in zero-gravity, it will also throw us in situations that we haven't really seen in gaming before, such as trudging across the surface of an asteroid that's spinning out of control, where you're forced to avoid light spots or risk getting burned to a crisp by the two thousand degree heat of the sun.



MODERN WARFARE REBORN

12 It's hard to believe it, but it's been almost a decade since *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* first released. This is the game that changed a generation of shooters, and it's being given a full HD overhaul by Raven Software. The remaster will feature the original campaign in full – boasting improved textures, physics-based rendering, high-dynamic range lighting and improvements to the audio. This will be a pure, classic *Call Of Duty* experience; perfect for those of you that are against the new movement systems. *Modern Warfare Remastered* makes the *Infinite Warfare* package look even more attractive.

TRAILER HATE

THE INFINITE WARFARE REVEAL TRAILER HAS NOW RECEIVED OVER 2,636,000 DISLIKES, MAKING IT THE MOST DISLIKED TRAILER IN YOUTUBE'S HISTORY

CLASSIC MULTIPLAYER RETURNS

13 When *Modern Warfare* arrived in 2007, its multiplayer changed everything for the FPS genre. Sadly, its servers have fallen into disrepair – making it difficult to return. Thankfully, Raven is also overhauling the multiplayer component of *Modern Warfare*, introducing dedicated servers and ensuring that everything is as you remember – only a little more beautiful. The weapons, killstreaks, and modes featured in the original are intact, though the Remaster will only feature 10 of the original 16 maps. The *Legacy* and Digital Deluxe versions of *Infinite Warfare* are going to be must-own items.

BIG MULTIPLAYER AMBITIONS

14 Multiplayer is becoming ever more difficult for Activision to nail down in *Call Of Duty*. The multiplayer shooter has never been in a stronger position, and it's fair to say that the likes of *Titanfall* and *Halo 5: Guardians* have proved a welcomed twist on the conventional *Modern Warfare* model for a while now. And so Infinity Ward will need to ensure it keeps the essentials intact – the three-lane map and twitchy-mechanical design – while it tries to 'combine *Call Of Duty*'s popular movement system with ground-breaking gameplay innovations'. It's going to be tough, but this is one area in which *Call Of Duty* can appeal.

DEFYING THE HATE CAMPAIGN

15 We spoke to analyst Michael Pachter, and he doesn't think Activision should be worried about negative feedback to the reveal trailer for *Infinite Warfare*: "I truly don't understand the herd mentality that would thumb down a trailer like that, so it must be just snarky behaviour on the part of fan boys to live out their entitlement fantasy that Activision is a charity and will give them *Modern Warfare Remastered* for free."



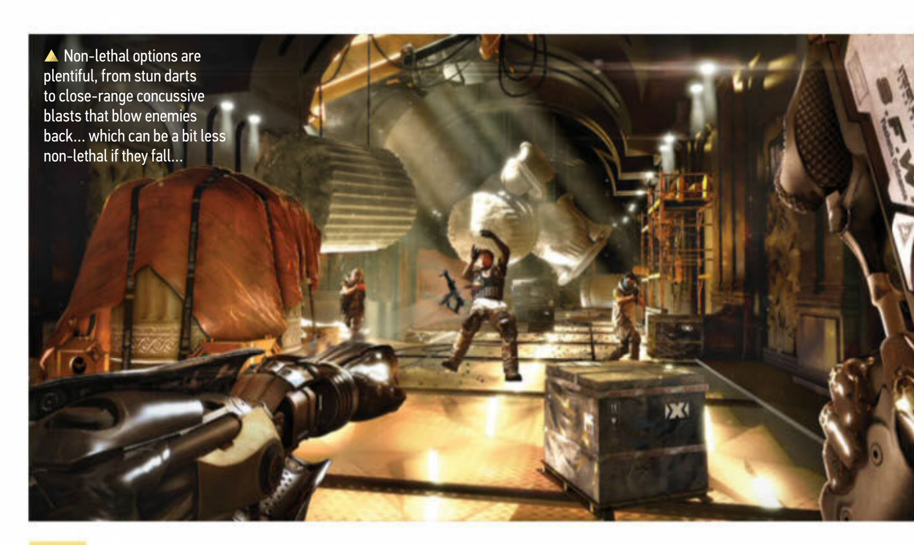
RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINES

DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED IS A CURIOUS BEAST, ONE WITH A MESSAGE OF GRIM TIDINGS FROM A FUTURE WHERE OUR OBSESSION WITH TECH HAS GOTTEN THE BETTER OF US, THOUGH IT DELIVERS THAT MESSAGE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY ITSELF. **GAMES™** GOES HANDS-ON WITH JENSEN'S LATEST MORAL ROLLERCOASTER AND SPEAKS TO THE TALENTED TEAM BEHIND THE GAME…

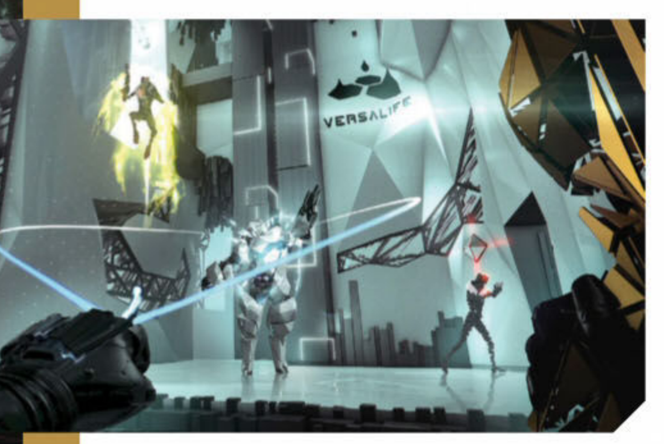
As we move into an era where things like augmented reality, wearable tech that becomes a part of who we are, fully immersive VR and hologram advancements are all happening and being celebrated in the here and now, it's growing increasingly apparently that it's 'Could we…?' Rather than 'Should we…?' that is the leading question in the modern tech market. As great as it is to see the former play out, to see the tech of science fiction from only a decade or two ago become reality, there are genuine fears surrounding the latter. The closer technology comes to being integrated into people on a mass scale – which, believably, could be only a few years out – the more risk there is of something going wrong. Only here, it's not a virus that corrupts your laptop's hard drive, but rather one that could alter who and what you are on a personal level.

That's pretty much the core conceit of *Mankind Divided*, and for once, the recent use of a live action trailer to set this up was actually a really smart play. This is a current issue, a fear, grounded in where we are today and, seeing how far we've come in the last decade, something that is legitimately within the reach of modern science. We've gone from the PC original being a good fifty years behind its chronological setting – long enough to make its contents feel as much like hard sci-fi as the flying cars, ray guns and teleporters of Sixties science fiction – to today, thanks to prequel *Human Revolution* and this follow-up, *Mankind Divided*, being only a decade behind the fiction, suddenly turning fantasy into topical, moral and political commentary that hits far closer to home. And that's something the team is seemingly both aware of and looking to fall in line with.

"Uninformed sci-fi is something I don't want us to do," explains executive art director Jonathan Jacques-Belletête. "There's so much bad uninformed futurism and sci-fi out there where artists just pull stuff straight out of their heads before getting informed about how these things might actually work in the real world. We're making sure that there's a lot of thought behind the futurism, that it's not just 'This building looks like this because we're in 2029'." Like that live action trailer, the game is much more affecting for this plausibility – seeing an early passage of play where Jensen's augmentations are on the fritz makes it feel more like an inconvenience than anything else, like having your phone GPS pack up when you're lost in a foreign city or something. Mass catastrophes like that which sets up the game – where augs are forced to act against their will by their implants, in turn causing a rather different rift between the haves and the have-nots than that which shapes today's socioeconomic climate – are depicted as freak occurrences, Jensen's trip to his local fixer to get his body sorted treated by all involved with no more urgency than a trip to get a phone screen fixed today.



▲ Non-lethal options are plentiful, from stun darts to close-range concussive blasts that blow enemies back… which can be a bit less non-lethal if they fall…



▲ Breach mode – a challenge mode, essentially – appears to offer all of the augmentations and tools of the main game, but the virtual setting means that they can be taken to the extreme here.



▲ Talos Rucker leads an aug rights group – appealing to his better nature might prove a little easier if you don't leave a trail of augmented bodies in your wake.

Despite dealing with issues and themes that perhaps feel more tangible and familiar than before, Jacques-Belletête is keen to have the game's design keep players on their toes mentally. "My role is to take the team's references and inspirations and find the spicier stuff that really brings in the *Deus Ex* feeling. Things that will break expectations, and that's what creates desire in people," he reasons. "If you see something you've seen a million times before, it goes into a little drawer in your brain with all those other things. That's how your memory functions, so it's mixed in with all the other times you saw it and it's really hard for your brain to remember it. It's just one big blur. But when you see something that breaks expectations, your memory isn't so sure what to do with it – it breaks it down and puts it into a whole bunch of different compartments, so it becomes a lot more present in your brain as it's in all these different places. That's really what I try to do with everything. It's not always successful… it's not always a good idea! But that's what I try to do, and for that I need to be constantly consuming things. Architecture, fashion, people, weird shows… anything *but* videogames, almost. If you want to break expectations, you have to look somewhere else."

Even though the game is dealing with real world locations, they're designed to feel like their counterparts more than act as interactive tourist guides – to capture the essence of the chosen setting while mixing that with a little bit of the *Deus Ex* special sauce. "The cool thing about Prague," says Jacques-Belletête of one of *Mankind Divided*'s settings, "is that with cyberpunk, you don't erase the past and build over it – it's always the past and the future mixed together. Having this »

▲ A combination of stealth and violence is a legitimate option, although takedowns still deplete your energy – a more patient approach that avoids confrontation altogether is often a better way to conserve resources.

beautiful old city and clashing it with cyberpunk elements made it even more potent. It's a really good mix, then we bring in that modern art, Jensen, the cops and yeah, it's all there. It looks like Prague – anyone from Prague would recognise it – but then it's got this crazy futuristic layer over it." Character, identity and variety are all clearly incredibly important to the team, even in more typical settings. The Dubai mission we played, for instance – set in a hotel that was abandoned mid-construction – could easily have felt like one of *Rainbow Six Vegas*' in-progress casinos or any number of gaming construction sites, but that design mantra of keeping the brain from being easily able to categorise and process things is still hard at work. "You see construction materials, you see cranes… all that stuff. You've seen *that* before. But there are still these little spikes of *Deus Ex* stuff within that level," Jacques-Belletête confirms, offering further explanation for the 'typical' nature of this setting. "There's a reason that Dubai's like this – it was planned like this, it was wanted like this and that's fine. But most of the time, I try really hard even in generic places to have something that will make people say 'Holy shit'."

Even within this, apparently the closest to a 'generic' environment we can expect from *Deus Ex*, we indeed find plenty to be impressed and intrigued by. In truth, it's incredibly hard to get an accurate cross-section of the game from so small and isolated a segment. Here, combat options (or those to avoid it entirely) are more or less locked down before you drop into the area – opt for the deadly force loadout and you'll find your silent takedown potential is extremely limited, for instance, but the payoff is that you're given the tools to quickly clear



READY, SET, GO!

After the runaway success of *Hitman's* diorama-themed puzzle spin-off and the format proving its versatility by even adapting to accommodate the more action-heavy nature of *Tomb Raider* without too much strain, it should come as little surprise to see another string added to Square Enix's mobile bow as *Deus Ex* joins the *Go* family. Thematically, it actually makes more sense than both its predecessors – the cyberpunk stylings of the game tie in well to themes of hacking and infiltration that manifest themselves in this mobile twist on things, and the abilities from the main games carry over well. There are terminals to be hacked to rearrange pathways or turn turrets on enemies, cloaking pick-ups to hide Jensen while traversing a single tile and likely a lot more besides – we only got to play the first few levels but even from those, it was clear that the franchise was a good fit for the format and we look forward to seeing how far the augs are pushed by the inevitably more complex tail end of the final game.



"It's about trying to create a soul for the game… If you just base it on tech, it probably lacks soul"

rooms, albeit in a more heavy-handed manner. The lack of ambiguity over dialogue choice is welcome, full previews available on highlighting each available option in stark contrast to the Telltale/*Mass Effect* route of having brief synopses of responses that can frustratingly shove you in the wrong direction at times. This mission's simplicity in terms of both loadouts and structures seems intentional – assuming the well-placed and genuinely useful tutorial segments as final rather than placeholder, this feels like a solid entry point to the game rather than something picked from later on, and the mission's climax sets up a classic morally grey narrative thread that will ultimately help shape how you build your own personal version of Jensen.

The suggestion that the game may have been shaped or influenced by the new wave of technology the series will for the first time call home is scoffed at ("I don't see how you can be 'influenced' by a machine!" Jacques-Belletête laughs), but the franchise's artistic lead is quick to talk us through his reasoning. "I'm the kind of art director who is all about the allegories behind the visuals and the messages that they carry," he tells us. "To me, I'm as much telling you a story as Mary [DeMerle] who literally *writes* the story. It's very common today in our industry to hear the phrase 'Show, don't tell' but back when we started out, it was less heard and it's something that we've always used. Adam Jensen's apartment is his 'museum' – that's actually what we called it during production. You can just walk around and you're told stuff just by looking at and watching things.

"For me, it's about trying to create a soul for the game and if you only base your stuff on graphics and on the latest tech, what's going to happen is that in six or seven years from now, your game isn't going to look good any more because it was just based on tech. And if you just base it on tech, it most probably lacks soul – ten years down the line, there's no soul and it looks like an ancient game, so you're sort of left with nothing. I'm very much about first and foremost trying to sow messages and meaning into the art direction and taking it from there. If you look at *Human Revolution*, the technical side was a little bit lacking – we're all aware and we've admitted it, but we still won some art direction awards and nominations and whatnot. Now that we're 'next-gen', not only will we have all the visual communication that's important to us – the soul, basically – but now at the same time, the tech will be there too."

Our own tech is not the only thing Square Enix is looking to get more out of, either – *Deus Ex* itself has plenty of science of its own that could be built into something bigger. And it will be. Enter Breach mode, a standalone 'challenge' mode, for want of a less generic term, that acts as a literal way to play out all the hacking and other digital infiltration that goes on in this high-tech world. While mechanically similar to the main game, it's a chance for both creators and players to spread their virtual wings a little wider, encompassing all kinds of different play styles and mechanics (including some that might be a little too abstract for the main game) in bite-sized chunks of gameplay that inspire competition and self-improvement via leaderboards. "For a long time, we've wanted to experiment, to give something else to players on top of the main game," producer Fleur Marty tells us. "We were playing with the idea of challenge maps at the beginning and we got to thinking that we have all these cool gameplay mechanics but in a full *Deus Ex* single- »



"We'll have people finish levels in six seconds and the designers are like 'How did you do that!?' The modifiers add a lot of chaos"

The Strong Arm of the Lore

Not to be outdone by Konami's mission to fit a 25-year-old amputee gamer with a Snake-style prosthetic, Square Enix too is looking to try and have its mechanical-armed star give something back to the community. We're told that blueprints and data for two different models – one styled after Jensen's in-game appearance and the other more abstract, polygonal and stylised – will be made available in order to allow those who have lost a limb the opportunity to potentially 'augment' themselves in real life. Actual plausability and functionality is yet to be seen, of course – a demo model we saw (hooked up to a PC and a camera) was able to replicate basic finger movements, although we suspect connecting such a thing to a human brain may be a somewhat more challenging case study.

▲ Though heavily stylised, Breach mode feels like it fits within the *Deus Ex* universe. That its overarching stories flesh out the characters and corporations of the core world also serves to cement this.

player experience, they are very constrained by the fact that we need to be credible and realistic. So we started thinking, what if we took these systems and put them in a completely abstract environment where we wouldn't be constrained? We started prototyping these bite-sized chunks of gameplay and people we having a lot of fun with it."

We were a little dubious at first, but quickly got the bug. Some levels might require a more forceful approach, or others greater agility – it's a chance to mess around with all that *Deus Ex* has to offer (and then some) without ever feeling like you need to base an entire playthrough around a particular approach. Loadouts are decided upon pre-mission, and only the confines of a memory allowance (which can be increased as you progress) determine what you can equip. This means free rein over a vast pool of weapons and augs for each task, with many taken even further than in the main game on account of the stylised action playing out inside a canon form of virtual reality, as a hacker breaking into a corporation's data files.

"We're shipping with three corporations, plus the first tutorial one. Later, we'll be releasing new corporations, which means a whole new set of maps and a new conspiracy to go along with it, but also new gameplay ingredients that go with the corporation in question," Marty explains, going on to detail just how closely these digital invasions will tie into the lore of the businesses involved. "What we're trying to do in telling the stories of these corporations is make sure that everything conveys the personality of the company, from art style to level design to gameplay elements. For instance, one of our corporations is Steiner-Bisley, a German weapon manufacturer. So when you're in Breach infiltrating them, they're these big wide-open levels that feel almost foundry-like – the lighting is very orange and there's pixelised magma on the walls and a lot of the AIs in there will have heavy weaponry. But if you infiltrate Versalife – which is more about bioengineering and medical – it's going to be much more organic, very green, very vertical and very weird, with a lot of platforming elements.

"We're already seeing – and it's a big word so I'm going to be careful with it – emergent gameplay here, " she continues. "Level designers of course have something in mind when they create the levels but when we start playing them, you'll have people finish levels in six seconds and the designers are like, 'How did you do that!? It's not possible!' The fact that we have the modifiers adds a lot of chaos to this and there are so many combinations that we can't test them all, so we don't know! Maybe there are some that will really break some maps and actually, we're kinda hoping for that because we're hoping players will take all the new toys we're giving them and play around with them." Said modifiers come via booster packs awarded for progress through the digital mainframe among other methods, including microtransactions, although you shouldn't panic about having to spend extra money just yet. "We are really, *really* trying to balance the game so that if you don't want to, you don't have to," Marty reassures us. "We're just thinking about those players who just want to go through all the content once, fast, and don't want to worry about getting better at the game. We're being extremely careful with balancing."

It's here that the game's narrative themes and the fears they sing of from a not-so-distant future crash headfirst into those of today, namely the proliferation of additional payments in full-price games. After an hour or two with the mode, it never feels mercenary or as though we'd need to pay to progress; more like we'd be able to isolate where certain perks might do well and return to those missions (if and when RNGsus smiled upon us) in search of a better score. Were this directly competitive, this system might be a problem but here, thanks to the timeless nature of a leaderboard system, there's nothing to stop smart score-chasers simply returning to targets months laters, nor anything to hinder those who just want to make steady progress.

"We know a lot of players have their own playstyles and may not want to redo the whole campaign to try another," reasons Marty when we discuss the greater freedom of Breach. "But that's also one of the reasons why we have those random booster packs – you will have to make do with what you get from them. You might be someone that played through the whole game using only a tranquiliser rifle but might find that all you get in your first Breach booster pack is a shotgun. You can try and get more boosters until you get the weapon you want, or you can give it a try. And maybe you'll enjoy it!"

▲ Tension between augs and 'naturals' makes it hard to know who you can trust. Choosing the right side will be tough… if there even *is* a right side.

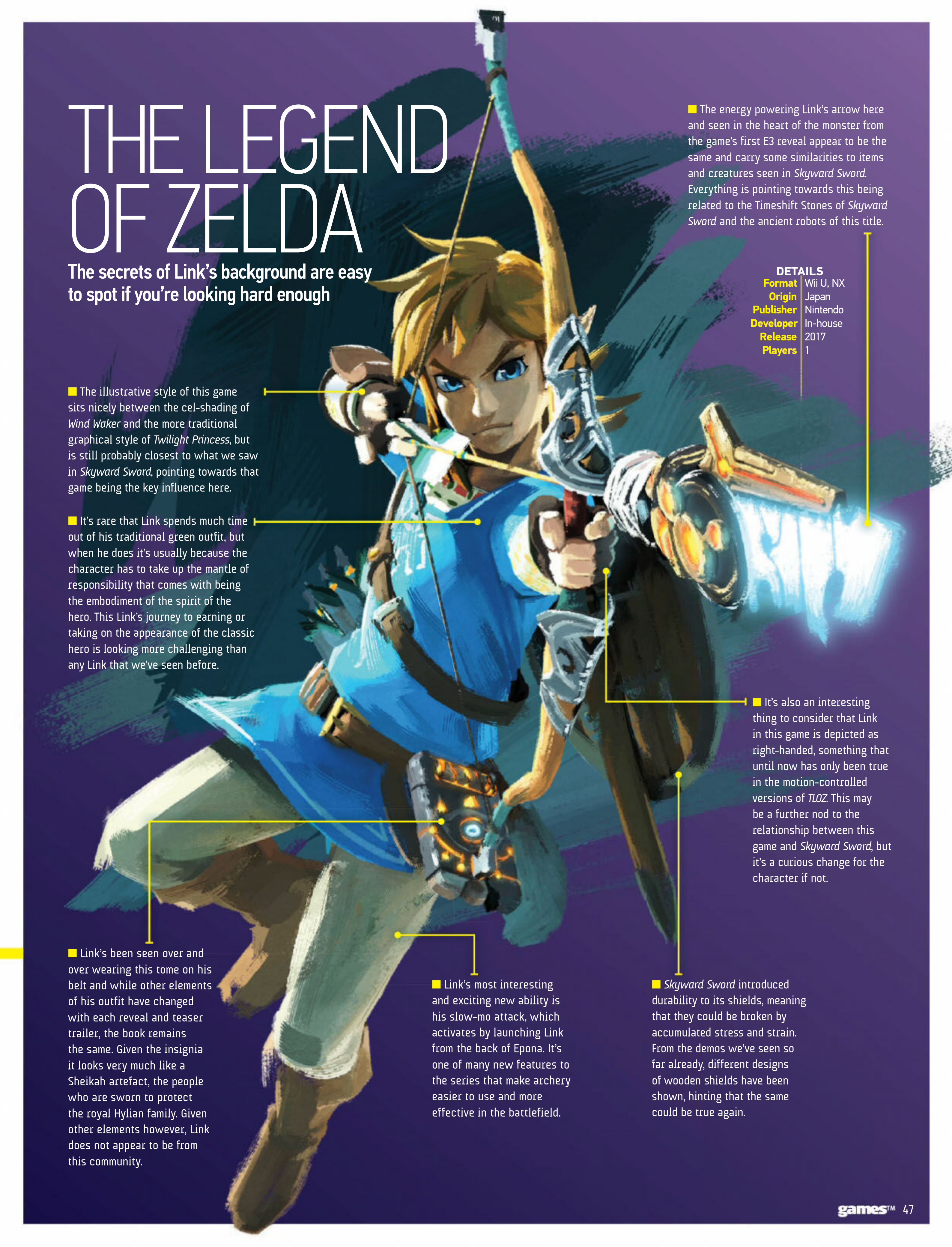


games to watch

AS THE GAMING CALENDAR PACKS OUT, THESE ARE THE GAMES YOU NEED TO BE PAYING ATTENTION TO ACROSS EVERY FORMAT

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

The secrets of Link's background are easy to spot if you're looking hard enough



The energy powering Link's arrow here and seen in the heart of the monster from the game's first E3 reveal appear to be the same and carry some similarities to items and creatures seen in *Skyward Sword*. Everything is pointing towards this being related to the Timeshift Stones of *Skyward Sword* and the ancient robots of this title.

DETAILS

Format	Wii U, NX
Origin	Japan
Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	In-house
Release	2017
Players	1

The illustrative style of this game sits nicely between the cel-shading of *Wind Waker* and the more traditional graphical style of *Twilight Princess*, but is still probably closest to what we saw in *Skyward Sword*, pointing towards that game being the key influence here.

It's rare that Link spends much time out of his traditional green outfit, but when he does it's usually because the character has to take up the mantle of responsibility that comes with being the embodiment of the spirit of the hero. This Link's journey to earning or taking on the appearance of the classic hero is looking more challenging than any Link that we've seen before.

It's also an interesting thing to consider that Link in this game is depicted as right-handed, something that until now has only been true in the motion-controlled versions of *TLOZ*. This may be a further nod to the relationship between this game and *Skyward Sword*, but it's a curious change for the character if not.

Link's been seen over and over wearing this tome on his belt and while other elements of his outfit have changed with each reveal and teaser trailer, the book remains the same. Given the insignia it looks very much like a Sheikah artefact, the people who are sworn to protect the royal Hylian family. Given other elements however, Link does not appear to be from this community.

Link's most interesting and exciting new ability is his slow-mo attack, which activates by launching Link from the back of Epona. It's one of many new features to the series that make archery easier to use and more effective in the battlefield.

Skyward Sword introduced durability to its shields, meaning that they could be broken by accumulated stress and strain. From the demos we've seen so far already, different designs of wooden shields have been shown, hinting that the same could be true again.

DISHONORED 2

Four things you need to know about

1 TRAILER TRUTHS There was more genuine gameplay in the original teaser trailer than you might have thought. For instance, the clockwork mansion that Emily Kaldwin scales is really in the game. You can even duck in behind the moving walls to find all sorts of secrets.

2 SKILL TREES In the original game, Corvo's abilities tended to weigh on the side of attack, with few cool abilities for those seeking a non-lethal path. That's now been addressed with the addition of branching skill trees offering lethal and non-lethal options all the way through.

3 A HOMECOMING *Dishonored 2* will begin with Emily Kaldwin on the throne of Dunwall, but will quickly move to Karnaca, the hometown of her father and the original game's lead, Corvo Attano. You can play as either character once the action moves here, but you won't be able to switch.

4 TWO PATHS Corvo and Emily have completely different skills and abilities, so while there may be some equivalent moves, like Blink and Emily's Far Reach, you will actually need to play the game at least twice to get the full experience. That's before we even get into the multiple endings possible for each.

DETAILS

Format	PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin	France
Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Developer	Arkane Studios
Release	11 Nov 2016
Players	1

POKÉMON SUN/MOON

Who should you choose as your new starter?







POPPLIO

TYPE: WATER **ABILITY:** TORRENT

■ Inspired by sea lions, Popplio is adept in water and less graceful on land, but still pretty powerful. Drawing on its skills with balloons and acrobatic tricks, it may prove an agile foe, while its type (excellent for defence) makes it a great all-rounder for your team.

ROWLET

TYPE: GRASS/FLYING **ABILITY:** OVERGROW

■ Increasingly a team favourite though incredibly weak to Ice Rowlet is a silent assassin, making no sound as it flies through the air before pouncing on its opponent. It's got close-range slashing attacks and long-range leaf attacks. It's a promising choice.

LITTEN

TYPE: FIRE **ABILITY:** BLAZE

■ This starter stands out on face value, but its potential evolutionary path is a concern. Will it eventually be a Fire/Fighter or Fire/Dark type? Perhaps even Fire/Poison? We're hoping for Fire/Dark as Litten's grumpy persona seems to fit; something of a feline counterpart to Houndoom.

DETAILS

Format	Wii U, NX
Origin	Japan
Publisher	The Pokémon Company
Developer	In-house
Release	18 Nov 2016
Players	1-2



FOR HONOR

Taking on two swordsmen at a time in *For Honor* is not impossible, still a tough challenge that will demand quick reflexes and a calm mind. We're not sure if a four-on-one scenario is possible in the game yet, but if it were, that would be the toughest challenge of them all.

Why Ubisoft may have a dark horse hit on its hands

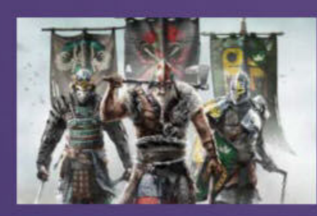
This isn't going to be a mainstream crowd-pleaser and that's great news. *For Honor* is a game that needs to be technical, considered, and challenging to master if it's going to work, and those values don't necessarily square with the one-button free-running ethos of Ubisoft in recent years. Thankfully, the team knows that a sword-fighting multiplayer experience with historical accuracy and MOBA influences needs to have some technical depth to it.

For Honor's three factions of Viking, Knight and Samurai are not going to have much narrative depth to them by default, so the gameplay has to be tight. Everything we've seen of *For Honor* points towards an interesting mix of light, cathartic hack and slash through hordes of enemies, interspersed with tense, thoughtful sword battles against online opponents. Mastering its stance-based combat on the right analogue stick, mimicking and parrying attacks, launching your own and taking advantage of your class' unique abilities, are likely to take time. Not something that our *COD*-addled minds will quickly adapt to, but we're hopeful we can get there.

DETAILS

Format	PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin	Canada
Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Release	TBC 2016
Players	1-8









HALO WARS 2

DETAILS

Format	Xbox One, UK
Origin	France
Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios
Developer	Creative Assembly
Release	Fall 2016
Players	1-2

Three things Creative Assembly brings to the franchise

1 GENRE EXPERTISE
Is there anybody in the business today with the track record of top-level real-time strategy games that this developer has? Having closed the original developer, Ensemble Studios, we can't think of a better fit in terms of experience for this title. The *Total War* games show a mastery of the genre.

2 BRAND AWARENESS
Total War: Warhammer has a number of things that are worth appreciating, but important among them is that it showed Creative Assembly can adapt itself to other IP. It managed to merge *Total War* with Game Workshop's tabletop experience into something really enjoyable and faithful to both.

3 GREAT TECHNOLOGY
Creative Assembly had a crack at a console RTS back in 2009 with *Stormrise* for Sega. It had mixed reviews, but *Alien: Isolation* showed what this team can do with a great graphical engine. We expect a gorgeous new game in the *Halo* franchise and much improved RTS console mechanics, too.



CRACKDOWN 3
ETA: TBC 2016

If the Xbox One has a secret weapon in its arsenal then Cloudgine's resurrection of this excellent superhero cop series is it. If the power of cloud processing can really deliver the destruction that's been promised, it's going to be exceptional.



TEKKEN 7
ETA: TBC 2016

Having established itself in arcades it's good to see that *Tekken 7* isn't passing over this generation of consoles. With *Street Fighter V* splitting opinion, *Tekken 7* could slide into the gap created, by offering a full single-player campaign.



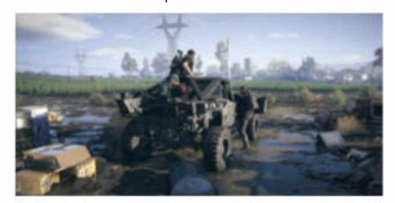
STAR CITIZEN
ETA: TBC 2016

The stunning space exploration game is really coming together as its crowdfunded promises come to fruition. If you've seen any of the physics demos or had the chance to play a beta, you know this PC exclusive could be groundbreaking.



TITANFALL 2
ETA: Q3 2016

EA is lining up one of its best slates of games for this year with *Battlefield 1* and *Titanfall 2* looking to dominate in the FPS genre. With a single-player campaign being added to the experience, this could be another hit for Respawn.



GHOST RECON WILDLANDS
ETA: TBC 2016

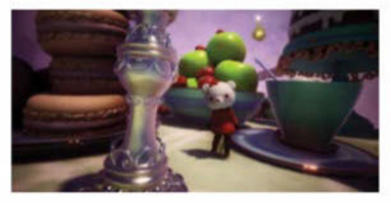
We've been so distracted by *The Division* we almost forgot Ubisoft had another *Tom Clancy* title on the way, but this sandbox-driven, tactical experience is looking to tick all the hardcore military boxes its online experience couldn't.



SCALEBOUND

ETA: TBC 2017

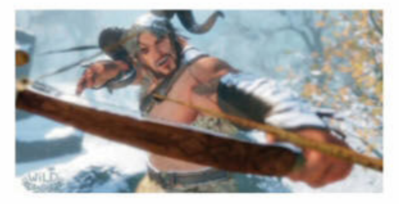
Snagging Hideki Kamiya to work on an Xbox One exclusive like *Scalebound* is a coup that we don't think has been highlighted enough. With a mix of *Monster Hunter* and *Bayonetta* in its gameplay, we're very excited by this.



DREAMS

ETA: TBC 2016

Trying to follow *LittleBigPlanet* as a series is a tall order, but the insane amount of freedom in *Dreams* from Media Molecule is mind-blowing. VR support seems highly likely, given its creative motion control design mechanics.



WILD

ETA: TBC 2017

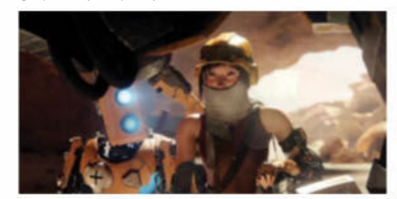
From the amazing mind of Michel Ancel, *Wild* is a survival adventure game with a lot more heart than we typically see in the genre. Procedural generation and a Neolithic setting make this a curious PS4 title.



HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

ETA: TBC 2016

The idea of Guerrilla Games making the transition from FPS to RPG was a concern until we saw *Horizon* in action. The setting looks superb, the gameplay varied and innovative, and, of course, graphically it's pretty incredible.



RECORE

ETA: TBC 2017

Another big get for Microsoft as *Mega Man* producer Keiji Inafune has teamed up with the makers of *Metroid Prime* to create a brand new action IP. The teases so far look very intriguing. We can't wait to look at more from this project.

MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

The tech evolution of BioWare's space odyssey

Everyone's pretty focused on the new lead character, alien races, and amazing journeys that *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is offering this generation, but we shouldn't forget the tech behind it all. Here are some interesting facts behind all the glitz and glamour…

DETAILS

Format	PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin	Canada
Publisher	EA
Developer	BioWare
Release	Q1 2017
Players	1 - TBC

1 The new *Mass Effect* has moved from the Unreal Engine to Frostbite 3, the DICE-developed engine that powers *Star Wars Battlefront* and *Battlefield 1*. It was also used to make *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but more time with the engine appears to have paid off.

2 BioWare has indicated there will be no loading between exploration and landing on a planet's surface, which strikes us as a bold claim. Some disguised form of loading seems likely, albeit behind a nice animation (akin to *Destiny*'s landing animation).

3 In an unexpected crossover of EA tech, *Mass Effect* is apparently making use of the crowd simulation programming from *Rory McIlroy's PGA Tour* gameplay that involves moving through a crowd. *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* also used it, albeit at a distance, for crowds.

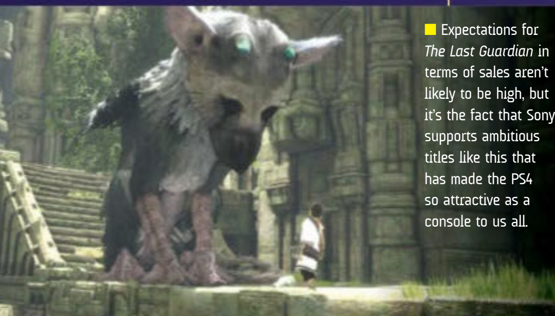
THE LAST GUARDIAN

The pressure is on for Sony to deliver



DETAILS

Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer	genDesign, SIE Japan Studio
Release	TBC 2016
Players	1



Expectations for *The Last Guardian* in terms of sales aren't likely to be high, but it's the fact that Sony supports ambitious titles like this that has made the PS4 so attractive as a console to us all.

You can tell by the way in which Sony is approaching *The Last Guardian* that it knows expectations are high. With each passing month without word on the game since last E3 concern and expectation has grown in equal measure, but as *Uncharted 4* was drawing closer, talk of *Gran Turismo Sport* and *The Last Guardian* have grown stronger. It's a pillar of PS4's line-up this year and since so much of the game is about the story experience, it's been reluctant to show too much.

The Last Guardian is a testament to Sony's commitment to quality. By all accounts the PS3 version of the game that would have followed in the footsteps of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* was performing terribly. The move to PS4 has freed this development team of the technical constraints of the last generation, but by no means has this made the job easier. *The Last Guardian* now needs to live up to current-gen expectations, and those are *high*. In terms of animation and texturing it already looks incredible. Few games have had such a journey; the destination needs to be worthwhile.

FINAL FANTASY XV

Five promising elements

1 IT'S STUNNING
It just looks incredible. The demos so far have been a little underwhelming in terms of the spectacle and scale on show, but the real gameplay footage is breathtaking.

2 MAGICAL MOVES
The combination of action combat and magic looks to make battles in this game even more dynamic and varied than you might have imagined. Using Noctis' Warpstrike ability looks very effective.

3 BOLD EXPERIMENTATION
No one can accuse Square Enix of playing it safe here. Sure, it's simplifying battle mechanics and attempting to open the series up for a new audience, but given its staunch fanbase, we'd call that a brave move.

4 'WIN BIG OR GO HOME' ATTITUDE
Not only is Square taking something of a risk by tinkering with its franchise beyond the battle mode, it's backing its bet with multiple side projects and universe-expanding titles.

5 IT'S GOT A FLYING CAR
Seriously, we know we should be grown-ups about it and everything, but the car itself is a beauty. Travelling around in this game promises to be epic.

DETAILS

Format	PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Japan
Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	In-house
Release	30 Sept 2016
Players	1



DETAILS

Format	PS4, PC
Origin	Japan
Publisher	Shibuya Productions
Developer	Ys Net
Release	Dec 2017
Players	1

SHENMUE III

Yu Suzuki's fan-funded RPG marches on

You can expect news and information regarding the return of *Shenmue* to be slow, but perhaps still steady in the coming months as its planned release is still late in 2017. However, some elements are becoming clearer. The game seems to be coming along well in Unreal Engine 4, for instance – as new screens can attest – PayPal backers will not be given Kickstarter-exclusive items, maintaining the promise of the original campaign from last E3, and Suzuki isn't being drawn to an Xbox One version of the game just yet. Sega is however giving some consideration to HD remasters of the original games however if recent quotes are to be believed. About time, too, if you ask us.

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

Deep in production and aiming high

There's been little word on David Cage's follow-up to *Beyond: Two Souls* until an image from the motion capture sessions was revealed by Quantic Dream's official Twitter account a little while back. It seems clear from the image that the team is deep in production and we shouldn't necessarily hold our breath for a quick release. Quantic Dream has set itself the goal of not only making a game that exceeds the graphical standards of the generation so far, but also pushes forward the developer's own passion for narrative story-telling in videogames. We're not sure which it will ultimately find harder.





DETAILS

Format	PS4
Origin	France
Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer	Quantic Dream
Release	TBC 2017
Players	1

10 HOTTEST INDIES

The independent games that cannot be ignored



BELOW

ETA: TBC 2016

Capybara's roguelike was off the radar for a little while, but it returned in style at PAX East this year and impressed us all over again. It's a stunning game with an amazing sense of scale and depth. It promises to be a challenging pleasure.



PYRE

ETA: TBC 2017

The maker of *Bastion* and *Transistor* is back with another great-looking indie title. This time it's going after the party-based RPG experience, adding its own uniquely colourful and vibrant art style to the mix. We're very excited.



YOOKA-LAYLEE

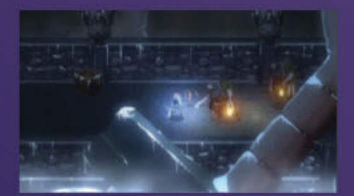
ETA: TBC 2017

The spiritual successor to *Banjo-Kazooie* still has some development to go, but this could be an amazing renaissance for the 3D platforming genre. Playtonic is packing this game with all the classic collectibles and hidden secrets.

INSIDE

ETA: TBC 2017

Playdead's follow-up to *Limbo* looks like another haunting platforming experience with a similar story structure. Expect it to gradually reveal its dark secrets to you as you play with smart background elements.



EITR

ETA: TBC 2016

As the best example of a pixel-art *Dark Souls* that we've seen, *Eitr* remains firmly on our radar. The quality of the animation in this game so far is superb and the challenging gameplay should make it a real test for seasoned players.



CUPHEAD

ETA: TBC 2016

One of ID@Xbox's brightest sparks, *Cuphead*'s boss run gameplay still has some question marks over it, but the art style and animation, mimicking early animation, remain as impressive as ever. It will be with us soon.

PSYCHONAUTS 2

ETA: TBC 2017

It's amazing that Double Fine is finally getting the chance to return to this title after years of fans wishing it would happen. Thanks to backing on its own crowdfunding platform, Fig, *Psychonauts* is coming back. It may be a little while in the making though.



BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

ETA: TBC 2017

When the maker of *Castlevania*, Koji Igarashi, goes off on his own to make a new 2D action game, everyone should take notice and the unprecedented backing he got on Kickstarter is proof that we did. *Bloodstained* is looking excellent.



HELLBLADE SENUA'S SACRIFICE

ETA: TBC 2017

Ninja Theory has been exhaustive in its coverage of this game, revealing lots of welcome behind-the-scenes detail, like the fact that some of its combat mechanics have recently been overhauled with new motion capture tech. It's looking better and better every time we catch up on its progress.



TACOMA **ETA:** TBC 2017

After *Gone Home*, Fullbright was always going to have a spotlight shining on it, so it's almost more impressive that rather than shrinking back and doing something modest, it pushed forward with the ambitious *Tacoma*. We say ambitious because even though this has all the trappings of another steadily-paced exploration game, the space station setting presents a number of new and interesting challenges. What's more, *Tacoma* is visually more advanced, taking on triple-A titles in the looks department.

crookedness
cheating
extortion fraud payoff
bribery
dishonest
eSports
corrupt
fraudulent
bribing
unscrupulousness
disrepute
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eSports
unscrupulousness
fiddling
corruption
crime
bribing
crooked take crime fiddling
payoff
exploitation breach
extortion
corrupted
fraud breach wrong
cheating
eSports
crime
bribery
crime
exploitation
cheating
crime
crookedness
corrupt

THE DARK SIDE OF ESPORTS

PROFESSIONAL COMPETITIVE GAMING IS AT RISK OF IMPLODING. WHAT PROBLEMS DO THE MARKET LEADERS FACE AS IT PREPARES TO GO MAINSTREAM?

Behind the spectacle and the storylines, claims of match-fixing, doping, cheating, harassment and contractual corruption are casting a long shadow over the burgeoning professional competitive gaming scene. Competitive gaming is fast becoming one of the biggest spectator sports in the world, with the market expected to be worth $1.1 billion by the end of the 2019. It's a big entertainment business venture on the verge of a mainstream breakthrough, but it's riddled with issues.

Earlier this year, Riot outright banned three teams from its League Of Legends Championship Series (LCS), putting the careers of over 15 young players in jeopardy after their respective organisations had their integrity called into question. In 2015, a player appeared to openly brag about taking performance-enhancing drugs during a tournament. That same year, Valve banned seven professional *CS: GO* players from all official-tournaments after they became embroiled in a match-fixing scandal. Worse still, in 2014, one Korean *League Of Legends* player jumped off a twelve-story building and straight into a coma, unable to deal with the pressure of his situation. Thankfully now out of his coma, Cheon "Promise" Min-Ki described the guilt of being threatened into deliberately losing matches by a manager looking to profit.

These are just a handful of the issues in eSports right now. Bryce Blum – an eSports lawyer practising out of IME Law and representative of ten professional eSport teams – describes certain aspects of the competitive gaming scene as being "like the Wild West" in its current incarnation, "where you [can] find very little organisation or stability." Of course, not every facet of eSports is like this – mired in controversy. The large majority of it is clean, but in the instances where it does rear its ugly head, there's a lot at stake. "I get asked this question a lot, what are the biggest problems in eSports?" considers Blum, "[But] people continue to paint eSports with this broad brush… the reality is, it depends so much on what game you're talking about."

THE FALL OF A GIANT

StarCraft seems as good as place as any to start; its problems could prove to be cancerous to the entire eSport infrastructure. "Match-fixing is the most serious issue we face in this industry. It's the most damaging; it's the doping of cycling," claims James Lampkin, vice president of pro-gaming at ESL. "I watched Korean *StarCraft: Brood War* die because of match-fixing. I'm *literally* watching *StarCraft II* get stabbed in the chest by match-fixing today."

If you weren't already aware, match-fixing is slowly, methodically, killing professional *StarCraft II*. That's a problem, particularly in South Korea where the Blizzard RTS is widely regarded as the national sport. But some members of that community are damaging the competitive integrity of eSports around the world, the consequences of which could be irreparable. Competitive gaming in South Korea is actually overseen by an official government body, KeSPA, which takes a "zero-compromise" stance on illegal activities in an attempt to foster "a healthy e-Sports culture," as organisation director Cho Man Soo made clear back in 2010, amid yet another scandal. Any example of illegal betting is met with punishment, ranging in severity from lifetime bans and huge fines to community service and even jail sentences.

In spite of this, the threat of sitting in a South Korean jail cell doesn't seem to act as a clear enough deterrent to committing fraud. In the past decade, over 20 South Korean *StarCraft* players and coaches have been arrested or investigated over match-fixing claims. Recently, one of the game's most legendary players, Lee 'Life' Seung Hyun, faced criminal charges after reportedly throwing matches to earn $60,000 – earning seven times as much money throwing two games than he would have for winning an entire tournament.

> "League Of Legends is fully owned and operated by Riot. They control that ecosystem with almost dictatorial levels of power"

The fact that match-fixing exists in some corners of eSports – at its highest level – is dangerous, the consequences it could have on the stability of the industry are far reaching. "It was doping that killed cycling and it is match-fixing that fundamentally damages eSports to a point that people lose trust in it," says Lampkin, perhaps aware of the damage such a scandal could do to competitive gaming in the West now mainstream media has its eyes on eSports. "The trust that exists between players and fans is so important, because *everything* relies on it."

That's a sentiment echoed by Fnatic team coach Viktor 'Vuggo' Jendeby as we ask him about the threat of match-fixing to his livelihood, just weeks after Valve confirmed that any "players proven to have taken part in match-fixing will be permanently banned" in *CS: GO*. "Of course [match-fixing] is always going to be a problem when there's a lot money involved, but it's really important for the integrity of the game that the fans always know that the teams are giving their 100 per cent. Fans need to know that every game matters, so I think it's super important that every match is played on fair conditions."

Guaranteeing competitive integrity in *StarCraft*'s highest levels is now an uphill battle, which removes a lot of the excitement from the scene and its best players – unfair to those who are trying to play legitimately in a corrupted system, perhaps, but it's the reality nonetheless. Much like a traditional sport, we need to know that what we're watching – investing our time, energy and interest into – is a battle born from legitimacy, not of whomever has the deepest pockets – otherwise everything crumbles. "The legitimacy of match results in a sport is everything, right?," notes Blum. "If you lose that you lose your fans and the sport doesn't exist any more."

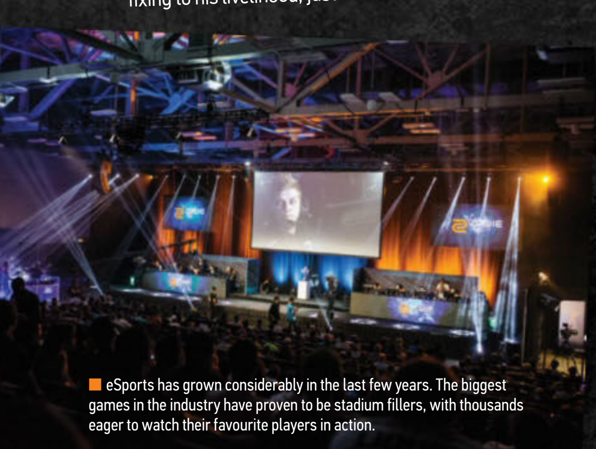
INTO THE RIFT

So what about *League Of Legends*, then? Riot has no problems enforcing broad rules, nor does it have any qualms with swinging the ban hammer when it deems necessary. As one of the most successful competitive games on the planet – the final game of the 2015 'Worlds' tournament drew in an overall unique viewer count of 36 million – Riot Games is often applauded for the way in which it structures and operates its league. Everything runs on a fixed and clear schedule all throughout the year, making it incredibly easy for fans both new and old to follow. That stability, however, seems to come at a price.

"*League Of Legends* is fully owned and operated by Riot. They control that ecosystem with almost dictatorial levels of power," says Blum, who is also legally representing Team Renegades, one of the organisations recently banned from the LCS following allegations that its players had been mistreated by the team's management; who also stands accused of deception in the transfer market. "Riot acts as judge, jury and executioner. They write, interpret and enforce rules with no third-party input, transparency, or the opportunity to appeal," Blum concluded after the ruling was made.

In this instance, Riot is keeping a lot of the details regarding the ban close to its chest. Renegades team owner Christopher Mykles was reportedly only made aware of the news 30 minutes before Riot announced it, nor would the publisher (he claims) present him with any of the evidence it cites it is in possession of. Riot didn't return **games™**'s request for comment, though it has written online that, "we are not disclosing evidence because we have an obligation to protect the parties involved." That's true to a degree, though you'd struggle to find any other professional sporting league or body in the world that would take such definitive action without giving the team or its players the opportunity to appeal.

In instances where Riot puts its foot down, there is very little teams can do to challenge the verdict. No independent arbitration court currently exists in eSports – where it's possible to challenge decisions in front of an impartial adjudicator or panel. Riot may be effective at stamping out


eSports has grown considerably in the last few years. The biggest games in the industry have proven to be stadium fillers, with thousands eager to watch their favourite players in action.


Professional *League Of Legends* has become one of the largest spectator sports in the world.



In the last decade, *StarCraft: Brood War* and *StarCraft II* have been embroiled in numerous match-fixing scandals that threaten the legitimacy of the entire sport and have resulted in jail sentences.

DOPING IN ESPORTS

HOW BIG OF A PROBLEM ARE PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUGS?

eSports had a reality check of sorts in 2015, as pro *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* player Kory 'Semphis' Friesen admitted in an interview that he and other players had taken Adderall during a tournament. "We were all on Adderall," he said at the time of performance enhancing-drug. "I don't even give a fuck. It was pretty obvious if you listened to the comms."

This was rumoured to have occurred in an ESL *CS: GO* tournament that Friesen was a part of, which led the organiser to introduce random drug tests in all future events. Adderall in the United States is commonly prescribed – used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – and it's thought to be a benefit to those looking to calm their nerves as they seek to win thousands of dollars on the professional *Counter-Strike* scene.

eSports Lawyer Bryce Blum contests that there's actually very little to prove that Adderall has any real effect on play, noting that there has been a surprising lack of research into the field, but does agree that it needs to be monitored closely in the coming years. "Doping is super controversial… there has never been any medical or scientific study that has linked amphetamines or some other type of drug to gaming and identifies it as a performance enhancing substance."

For ESL CEO Ralf Reichert, implementing random drug testing to eSports isn't so much about stamping out a problem that could be quietly running rampant – but instead used to better educate players and help create a sense of transparency. "I think it always comes back to legitimacy – and that has a lot to do with perception, he says. "The most important piece of it actually is the communication – the player briefing, the making it transparent for the players as to why it's a problem. The education piece is actually as important as the [drug] tests. I'd be shocked if it wasn't an industry standard in a couple of years."





HARASSMENT IN ESPORTS

HOW VITRIOL THREATENS FAMILY-FRIENDLY FUN

Users of the internet are no strangers to hate mobs, especially in the gaming scene. But their impact on competitive gaming has gone largely unnoticed, until now. The staggering range of harassment that exists in eSports came to a head at DreamHack earlier this year. African-American competitor Terrence 'TerrenceM' Miller was subjected to a torrent of racist abuse on the Twitch stream's chat log as he earned his first real success in the Hearthstone eSports scene.

"I knew it would be bad, but I didn't think it would be that bad," he said in a post-match interview with Polygon. "I was getting texts from my parents saying, 'Oh, we saw you on your interview, really good job.' And I was just hoping they saw it in full screen and didn't see the chat."

They did, of course, and it revealed that popular streaming sites such as Twitch still have a lot of work to do to combat racist, sexist and hateful comments. A team of ten moderators could hardly keep it at bay, and it's clear that something needs to change – the last thing eSports needs is to be dragged into the vitriol that poisons much of the online gaming community as it hits the mainstream.

"We take harassment very seriously and understand how important this is for the entire Twitch community. We currently approach chat behaviour by providing broadcasters tools, education, and autonomy to police their own channel. While in this instance the broadcaster was unable to fully prevent the described behaviour, Twitch has a responsibility to broadcasters and players to provide a welcoming environment," noted Twitch in a statement. "We are exploring new tools and processes to increase awareness and mitigation of these issues, and will continue to take action against chatters who committed reported violations."

eSports already suffers from a lack of diversity in many quarters. There's a lamentable yet understandable lack of representation in professional-level competitive gaming because of harassment; after all, seeing someone like you assaulted in such a relentless and public fashion isn't likely to fill you with the confidence to get involved. All eyes are on Twitch now to set a precedent; harassment needs to be stamped out now before it's too late.



The prize pool rewards for winning a major eSport final have become pretty insane, some are even eclipsing paychecks attributed to sporting institutions such as the FA Cup and Wimbledon finals.



If you look at a major final in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *DOTA 2* and *League Of Legends*, the live viewership figures are higher than some of BT Sports' 2016 Champion's League coverage.

misdemeanours in the LCS, but it's also been suggested to **games™** that it does so at the cost of professionalism and transparency.

"The dispute resolution mechanisms and the punishment procedures in place are not something you would want for any government, court of law, [or] administrative panel," Blum continues, adding, "they lack the basic indicia of fairness that you would want to see doling out punishments or resolving disputes."

This situation is largely indicative of a problem that has plagued high-level competitive *League Of Legends* for a while now: if Riot says 'Jump', you say 'How high?' That's a result of the contract you sign with the publisher to play its videogame professionally. "I think it is one of the great myths of eSports," asserts Blum, "that because they own the game they can do whatever they want."

He tells us that the lack of transparency from Riot could have a huge affect on the growth and sustainability of *League Of Legends*, especially as investment grows and lucrative TV distribution rights come into play. "If you're an [investor] that's thinking about eSports as the future of sports and want to get in on the ground floor – and you're on the outside looking in – [imagine] seeing an ecosystem where a single entity has the ability to essentially strip all of the value of your investment without any input from you. Or any transparency to the evidence against you or even where that evidence is coming from, without any meaningful form of due process and without any right to appeal. It isn't just scary," he considers, "it is fundamentally problematic."

For Blum, a change in Riot's approach to dispute resolution is essential to the growth of the business and a huge problem that sits alongside affirmative cheating and the contractual problems that plague certain corners of the industry. Change is coming, but it's impossible to say how long it will take for us to see it.

"[Riot] are going to be giving up some of their ultimate authority on decision making eventually, for me it's a question of when not if," he considers, noting that ultimately it will be the players that can enforce change. "The structure surrounding *League Of Legends* eSports is very similar to the structure surrounding the NBA or Major League Baseball… the early days of traditional sports are all marred in extreme league dominance that, over time, the players in those instances gained more economic value, they organised better and they asserted their collective leverage.

"If Riot is so stubborn about maintaining its 100 per cent authority over *League Of Legends*, it could wind up alienating all of the big teams in the world, which isn't good for anybody… we need to address these issues now, so that we have built the pillars on which sustainable growth is possible."

> "There are periods where we work from the minute we wake up until the minute we go to sleep"

UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH

"Valve is almost entirely uninvolved in their eSports system so there is no overarching governing body. What that leads to is tournament over-saturation, competing schedules – it's bad for everybody," says Blum, noting that the problems facing *CS: GO* and *DOTA 2* enthusiasts are almost the exact opposite to those of *League Of Legends*.

"It is not good for professional *Counter-Strike* that the best two teams in the world play each other three times a week. It makes it very difficult to develop storylines, it makes it very difficult to monetise the content because there is just so much of it out there… there's never a point in my life where I'm jonesing to watch professional *Counter-Strike* because there's just so much of it, which is a problem."

He isn't wrong: professional *CS: GO* is on track to topple even *League Of Legends* as the most popular competitive game in the world, experiencing unprecedented growth over the last two years. There's *a lot* of it, all of the time. It's a shift that is putting a big strain on the players' time, mental health, and the quality of the play itself.

"There are periods where we work from the minute we wake up until the minute we go to sleep," recalls Jendeby. "We go to a lot of tournaments, being away one or two weeks [every] month for the whole year, it is stressful. It is really painful for relationships – friends, family, as well as girlfriends – it can be really frustrating," Jendeby tells us. "There are so many tournaments; everyone wants to be a part of it. There isn't that much time for preparation… we can't really sit down and talk about how to evolve our game. The progress of the tactical level of the game is too slow, because no teams really have the time to sit down and build something," says the young coach. Not that he would trade it away: "I still think it's worth it, though, it's so much fun."

Tournament oversaturation is a very real problem in *CS: GO*, and it largely distracts from the contractual, doping and gambling problems that continue to plague the game. As Valve has stepped away from taking creative control over its eSport ecosystem, it's down to the independent organisers to do it. Everybody, from the established forces such as MLG and ESL to hopeful new upstarts, wants a piece of the action. This leads to conflicting schedules (there's seemingly little to no communication between organisations), leading to teams having to choose between tournaments and, ultimately, frustration for viewers.

"We probably have too many entities organising *Counter-Strike* tournaments, there is too much content… Ultimately, what's going to happen is a selection of tournament organisers are going to come together and collaborate, setting schedules that are going to benefit everybody," considers Blum, who also notes that as more money goes into bigger tournaments, eventually the smaller ones will organically die off."

Though ESL's Lampkin isn't so sure this will happen any time soon. "When leagues partner together, it just creates conflict," says Lampkin, implying that ESL has attempted to partner various league organisers together in the *CS: GO* scene as it established its Integrity Initiative and WESA. "We [ESL] would say something like, 'okay we are going to create a piece of branding,' but what's the order of the logos? What's the name of the league… it creates all of these fundamental business problems that the leagues can't get over."

This highlights a problem across all of eSports; there is no affirmative action to fix anything. It's about to explode onto the mainstream, to somehow grow even bigger than it already has become – and still the market-leading games struggle to sort out the basics. Ultimately, the success or failure of eSports as an industry doesn't rest on the games that are popular now – ultimately, lifecycles end and new games arrive – but it's the rules, the regulations and the precedents that we set now that will largely inform the future of competitive gaming as a profession and spectator sport. It is perhaps Blum who puts it best: "It's our [collective] responsibility to get some of these structures in place now, so that we don't shoot ourselves in the foot later."

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Reviews



64

OVERWATCH

How well has Blizzard transitioned from MMOs and strategy games to the FPS, and more importantly, to consoles?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

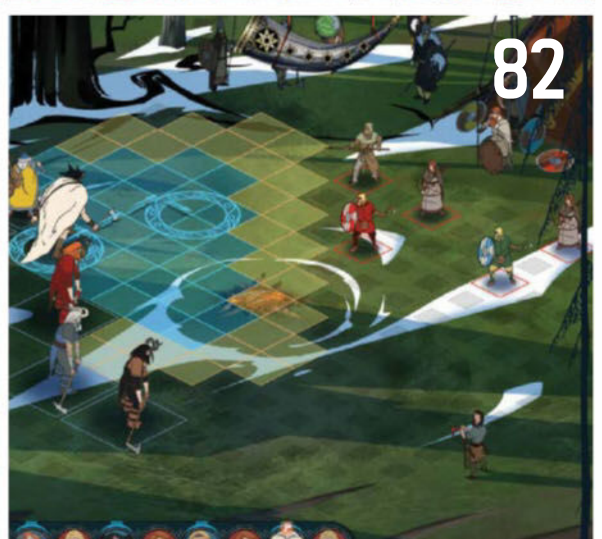

68


70


72


74


76


82

AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN

Overwatch

***Overwatch* succeeds and surprises on so many levels that it's actually a little embarrassing.** Embarrassing, that is, for the myriad of developers currently working on first-person shooters – *Overwatch* exhibits a degree of technical excellence that will be desperately sought after in the years that follow, though ultimately difficult to replicate. Blizzard has once again sauntered out of its comfort zone and manufactured magic out of madness, though it falls short of perfection by thinking it could exorcise the curse *Modern Warfare* has left hanging over the multiplayer shooter space.

Overwatch feels like the game Blizzard has been building towards for a decade. A continuation of the design philosophy that gave us the likes of *Hearthstone* and *Heroes Of The Storm*. Smaller projects that are easier to support and quicker to enhance with new content than the *Diablo*, *Warcraft* and *StarCraft* franchises. The result is a focused multiplayer shooter in *Overwatch* that, admittedly, doesn't strive to do a lot in the space it occupies – but what it does tackle, it does pretty damned impressively.

It would be so easy to write *Overwatch* off almost immediately, due to its apparent simplicity. At a first glance, its multiplayer action seems to live exclusively in the shadow of *Team Fortress 2*. Two teams of six vie for control over objectives, points, and strategic positions. The art style is distinctive, its class roles clearly defined and each one of its heroes comes with a clear personality – so much so that it feels like they could each be the star of their own IP. But *Overwatch* is deceptive in this respect. While it may look simple on the surface it is anything but. It's an exercise in creative chaos, a game as fun as it is demanding of your time and patience.

This is a shooter that runs at a frantic pace, with its layers of complexity emerging one after another the longer that you play. It puts emphasis on class synergy and cooperation, *Overwatch* changes drastically depending on what hero you choose and what role you assume within a shifting balancing act. Lone wolves die quickly; *Overwatch* is designed in such a way that it forces constant clashes between a wide variety of heroes. Assuming control over the correct hero (within the context of both team compositions) is integral to finding overall success and personal satisfaction.

At its heart, *Overwatch* is a character-based shooter. While it may feature four basic classes of Offence, Defence, Tank and Support, no two characters within each bracket function in a similar way. Mercy and Lucio may both be healers, but where one uses angel wings to quickly zip across large distances to provide focused health and damage buffs, the other feels like it's been ripped straight from *Jet Set Radio*; skating around the map fluidly, utilising infectious grooves to keep players up on their feat. McCree and Reaper may both wield dual hand-cannons, but neither moves or fires like the other. This extends across every single one of *Overwatch*'s 21 playable heroes, and it's your selection – and how it aids your team's synergy – that defines the pace of the action.

While many of the characters are entirely unique, there are some that fit into familiar shooter archetypes. Some display the arena shooter sensibilities of *Unreal Tournament*'s avatars, while others are able to lean comfortably on the fluidity and gameplay loops exhibited by *Titanfall*. There's the typical military grunt, Soldier 76, who serves as a gateway for players more accustomed to the speed of *Call Of Duty*, but then there's also the hyper-intelligent gorilla, Winston, waiting for whenever you're ready to try something with a larger emphasis on mobility and melee-brutality.

There's a great thrill to be found in making these types of decisions in *Overwatch*: do you choose to rely on your mastery of one character or decide to try something entirely new for the good of the team? You need to make this decision every time you die, with the game giving you the freedom to switch between heroes and experiment according to the composition of your team and, integrally, the enemy's.

Blizzard's greatest success in *Overwatch* isn't the fact that it has been able to craft so many unique and wonderful characters to play, but in the way that it has been able to balance them. Every round acts as an opportunity to be taught a valuable lesson. Just as you begin to suspect that one particular hero may be overpowered in certain

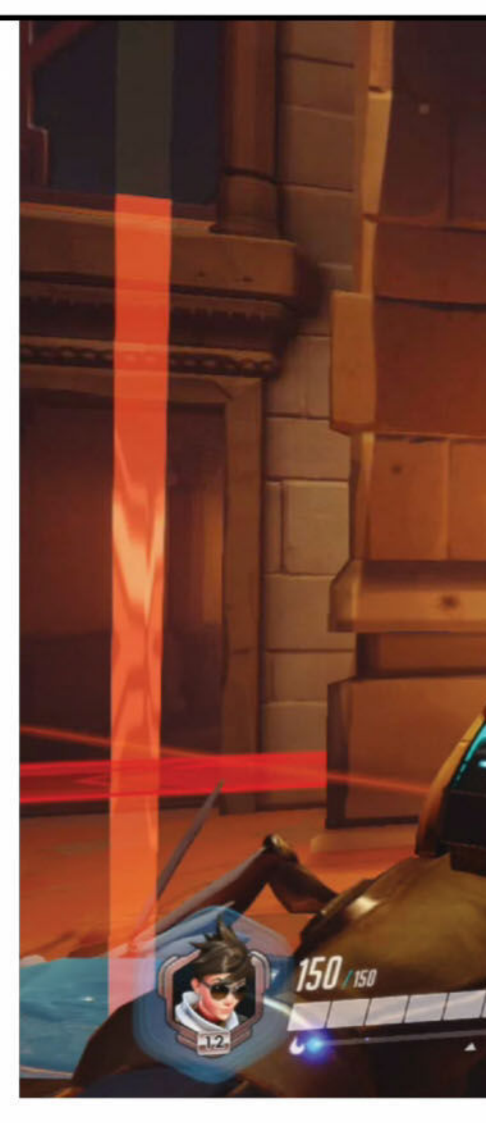
CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

FREE STUFF: Blizzard will bring new modes, maps and heroes to *Overwatch* for free in the coming months, including Ranked play which arrives in July.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Left: *Overwatch* is fast and frantic, with an emphasis placed on working within a team and changing your character to match whatever threat the enemy players may throw your way. It's often exhilarating, with teams battling out until the very last second to find victory.

BETTER THAN

BATTLEBORN



WORSE THAN



TITANFALL



Left: A welcome break from the norm, healing is a lot of fun in *Overwatch*. Mercy has essentially zero damage output, so instead needs to rely on keeping team mates around her alive for protection. She also has the ability to buff damage, should you find a rare moment where you don't need to heal.

THIS IS A SHOOTER THAT RUNS AT A FRANTIC PACE, WITH ITS LAYERS OF COMPLEXITY EMERGING ONE AFTER ANOTHER THE LONGER THAT YOU PLAY



DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

There's a lot to love about *Overwatch*'s art direction. The game is bursting with vibrant colour and looks like it's been ripped from a Pixar or Disney production. But there's a lot to love beneath the surface too, with the attention to detail paid to the audio and visual design truly impressing. Enemy sounds are louder than that of your team mates; each hero has a unique weapon and footstep sound, to the point where you can identify which enemies are in your immediate vicinity without actually seeing them. *Overwatch* is full of little details like this that help you prepare for the attack-and-defend scenarios that you'll find yourself embroiled in constantly.



scenarios, you'll just as quickly realise that you were approaching it all wrong. There's a very real *rush* to finally figuring out a takedown strategy against a foe or particular situation, and you'll encounter it in almost every game you play.

Overwatch hides its balance underneath a sense of perceived skill. Blizzard hands you 21 characters and leaves you to it; whether you work out how to utilise each hero and counter your most deadly opponent is largely dependent on how willing you are to learn and experiment with new plays and tactics. The way the various characters can combo together adds depth and strategy to what could have been an otherwise stripped-back experience. It's easy to learn but hard to master, as the old saying goes, especially if you are running solo in matchmaking.

As with any online-only multiplayer game, it can sometimes be difficult to find a degree of separation between the game itself and the community that has flocked to it. As a new player to the game – or if you're on your own against a team that's clearly communicating – *Overwatch* can be frustrating. If you're paired with randoms, it can take just one or two players who are chasing an invisible kill-to-death ratio metric, rather than playing the damned objective, to completely side-track a round. This isn't a problem in something like *Call Of Duty*, where one player can turn the tide of an entire match through impressive map management, but in *Overwatch* team play isn't just recommended – it's necessary to succeed. Everything is better with friends, and that sentiment extends to *Overwatch*.

While the hero balance is immense, a few map design elements seem to be ill-conceived. Of the 12 maps available at launch, many are built around single dead zones situated before an objective point. Insane strategies are already in place from the community to keep attacking players at bay at the first hurdle; a lot of the time you need your own team to be totally in sync to crash through a chokepoint. It's exhilarating when you manage it, but an exercise in futility when your team won't switch to snipers to combat fixed turrets, or to speedy, space-warping heroes to take down shield-wielding enemies. Play enough of it, and *Overwatch* will alter your brain. It will let you see seemingly insurmountable scenarios and encourage you to find a way to overcome them through previous experiences – sadly there's just nothing you can do when faced with a team-mate that doesn't want to play ball.

If you feel the frustration growing and need a break from matchmaking, you're essentially out of luck. Considering the unique strengths of each of the heroes, you may be surprised to learn that there's very little back-story to dig into here. Blizzard may have packed its heroes full of strong personalities and its maps with an undeniable sense of visual identity, but it's a little jarring to discover that the game's lore is expanded online in animated shorts and nowhere else. Perhaps this is the changing face of Blizzard; a studio that once revelled in its intricate 'TL;DR' plot devices stepping back from story in an effort to pull focus onto the service itself.

That does, of course, create its own set of problems. *Overwatch*'s fluid approach to design, where the balance of power can shift with a well orchestrated character change, ensures a strong 'just one more game' mentality is in place. Outside of that, there's very little to keep you hooked in a tangible sense. The progression system in

FAQs

Q. IS THIS A MOBA-SHOOTER THEN?
Overwatch has a focus on specific heroes, like a MOBA, but it features very little else from the genre. This is first and foremost an arena shooter.

Q. IS IT PAY-TO-WIN?
Not at all. The microtransactions in the game only extend to the randomised Loot Boxes, and they only give you cosmetic items.

Q. IS THERE ENOUGH CONTENT?
While more maps would have been nice, our biggest concern is the lack of game modes. There isn't yet enough diversity here for an online-only game.



Right: Playing with random players is fine *most* of the time, but playing with friends is the best way to play *Overwatch*.



Above: D.Va shares a lot of her gameplay moments with that of *Titanfall*, in so much as she's in a huge hulking mech one minute and a nimble pilot on foot the next. Should the mech get destroyed, D.Va's Ultimate ability has one deployed instantly in the field for you.



DO YOU CHOOSE TO LEAN ON YOUR MASTERY OF ONE CHARACTER OR DECIDE TO TRY SOMETHING ENTIRELY NEW FOR THE GOOD OF THE TEAM?

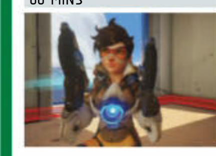
Below: There will be some heroes that you won't like playing as, but the game is designed in such a way so that you'll be bound to find one that suits your playstyle.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

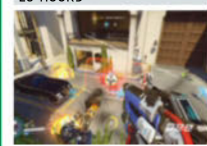
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS



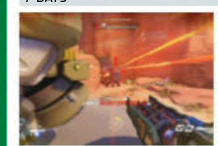
There's so much to love in *Overwatch*, and – for all that she's been one of the main faces of the game – it's only Tracer's voice that's grating on a game by game basis.

20 HOURS



Starting to master characters and get a handle on the maps. At this point, playing with friends reveals some interesting team compositions and attack strategies.

7 DAYS



If we have to escort one more Payload we're going to scream, but the hunt for another Legendary skin is too appealing. You'll likely have a definite favourite at this point.

PERSONAL PLAYSTYLE

While it could be easy enough to think that most of the fun is to be found with a character with high damage output or abilities, we've found that there are a lot of good times to be had in the support role. Unlike most shooters that feature healing characters – where you're usually stuck occasionally chucking someone a buff while fighting – *Overwatch*'s healers are forced to juggle a ton of responsibilities. The four support heroes not only give you an array of damage and speed buffs, but also different degrees of healing and battlefield potency. It can be stressful at times, but there's no better joy to be found than keeping an entire team alive in an integral game-winning moment.



Overwatch is lacking, to say the least. The game simply doesn't contain the same item escalation or sense of progression that we've come to expect from our multiplayer shooters. This is partly *Modern Warfare*'s fault – ensuring dozens of cool unlocks were tied to player skill as you levelled – though Blizzard is clearly hoping that the fact that it has a fun, approachable style will be enough to keep player interest up as it gets to work on its next piece of free DLC.

Upon levelling up, you are granted a Loot Box, which unlocks a randomised variety of cosmetic upgrades that scale in rarity for your heroes. Loadouts and weapons are, of course, locked down from the outset – that's integral for the game's meticulous balance, you should always be aware of what your rival has to hand before you engage. Unfortunately, that means that many of the rewards for playing are merely dull accessories, such as spray paints or alternative lines of dialogue. There's no telling whether you'll get an item for a character you actually like playing, which feels like you're constantly gambling on whether you'll get an item you actually want versus one that feels like you've just been lumped with, akin to *Hearthstone*'s randomised card packs.

Blizzard has publicly stated its problems with getting a functioning progression system into *Overwatch* in the past, but the current infrastructure feels too needlessly barebones and clearly in need of refinement. Then again, if you're tired of waiting for that rare skin you wanted, you could always purchase a few Loot Boxes via in-app purchasing – also à la *Hearthstone* – and take fate into your own hands…

Truth be told, 'barebones' is how a lot of *Overwatch* feels right now. A lack of game modes (essentially four variations of King Of The Hill) just doesn't cut it and the 12 maps are already starting to become a little stale. It doesn't help that the rotation in matchmaking seems oddly weighted to the same handful of locales, and that it doesn't yet seem possible to build a persistent party to move between various games; instead, it breaks you and your friends apart as soon as a room closes or disconnects. All of this only undercuts how intoxicating the moment-to-moment action can be, though it's likely this might improve as the free content starts arriving.

FINGERPRINT

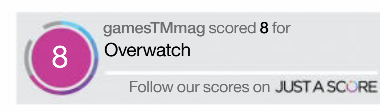
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

INDIVIDUALITY: Between the 21 heroes you'll easily find something to fit your playstyle and no two act or handle in the same way.

But these are minor issues. Right now, *Overwatch* is a fantastic multiplayer shooter that will likely only hold your attention in the weeks to come if you have friends to roll with. Playing solo, you might find that the lack of progression hooks leave you wanting more. If this is truly the new direction for Blizzard, we applaud the studio for what it has created here. *Overwatch* is a triumph, it just needs its en route DLC to let it really shine.

VERDICT

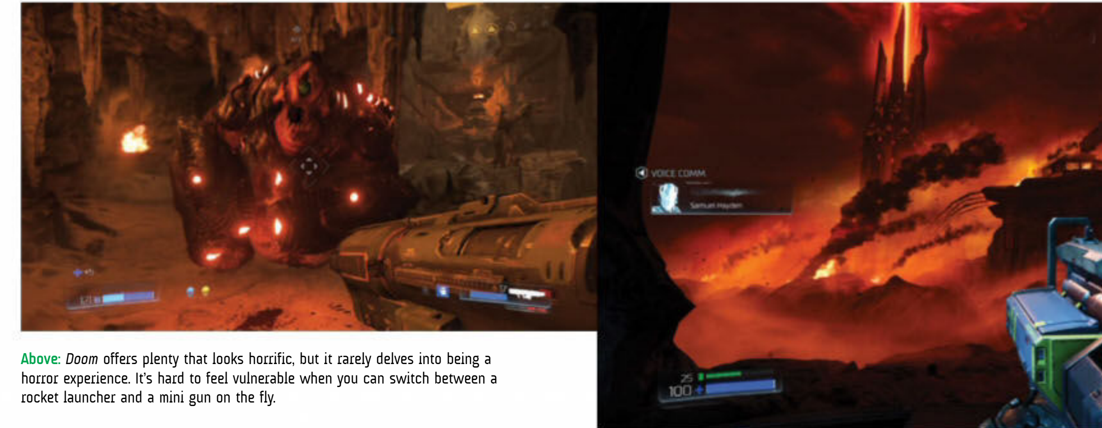
AN INTRICATELY FINE-TUNED, IMMEDIATELY FUN SHOOTER



THERE HAVE BEEN MORE SOPHISTICATED GAMES, MORE NUANCED, AND MORE INNOVATIVE, BUT FEW AS FUN, CHALLENGING AND INTENSE

NEED FOR SPEED

The solo campaign of *Doom* feels like a game built for speed-running, which is another way of saying it's clear that the id team worked tirelessly playing through it over and over, smoothing out every possible bump and adding in as many interesting turns to give those looking for additional levels of challenge something to chase. We've already seen some amazing times posted for playing through on the toughest difficulties, but we could sense that additional playthroughs would be rewarding as we scratched the surface of the game on our first visit. *Doom* is a rare example of an FPS in recent times where we've really wanted to return on higher difficulties and work our way up.



Above: *Doom* offers plenty that looks horrific, but it rarely delves into being a horror experience. It's hard to feel vulnerable when you can switch between a rocket launcher and a mini gun on the fly.

DETAILS
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC,
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: id Software
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-12 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

A HELL OF A TIME

Doom

There was a point during the course of our first playthrough of *Doom* where we were not very happy with it at all. While we were appreciating it aesthetically and could see what id Software was trying to do, we were becoming increasingly frustrated with issues of pacing and escalation and one or two enemy types that seemed designed to annoy to the point of gamepad-snapping anger.

Lucky then that we had a little time to calm down and reflect on what was really going on, because when *Doom* comes together it's one of the most exhilarating and satisfying single-player campaigns we've played in a long while. Actually, pretty much the best no-nonsense FPS since MachineGames' *Wolfenstein*. There have been more sophisticated games, more nuanced, and more innovative, but few as fun, challenging and intense.

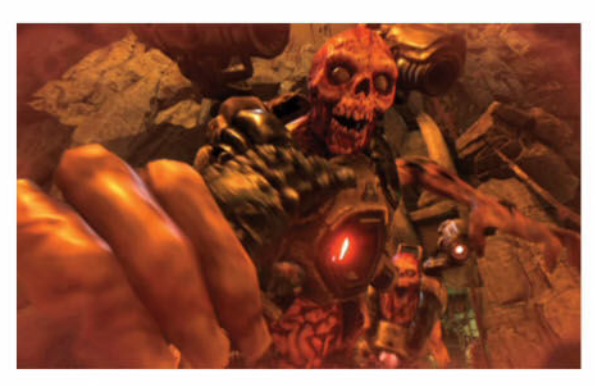
Doom is by no means a perfect game, however, hence so much of our early frustration. Its balance of old and new ideas, staying true to the past of this series while attempting to integrate some modern twists can feel a little mismatched at times. When it clicks, it hits some really high notes as you blast your way through demons, glorying in the flying viscera, hunting for hidden secrets everywhere. When it doesn't work, it lacks fluidity, enemies become a drain on your patience as difficulty spikes seem horribly uneven, and hell loses its sense of fun. Because however intimidating and creepy id's new vision of the underworld might be, it's mostly played for laughs.



Below: Graphically, this is one of the best looking shooters we've seen in a long time and once again picks id Software out as a developer that pushes tech as well as delivering solid experiences.

Just as the original concept for this series dictated, once you leave Mars and head into the depths, it's like you're shooting your way through a series of different heavy metal album covers. *Doom* is a game that demands near constant movement thanks to its non-regenerative health system, limited ammo and powerful, mobile enemies. Each section of the game is a new playground of running, leaping and shooting things in the head until they explode into goo. In terms of level layout and the way that the game structures these encounters to gradually scale up, *Doom* is largely a success.

The troubles of *Doom* tend to set in when the balance and pacing turns to frustration. The early stages of the game for instance are punctuated too much by what is ultimately an irrelevant story. *Doom* doesn't carry too much narrative luggage, we're pleased to say, but what's left can still feel cumbersome and intrusive. That it gradually falls away the deeper into the campaign you go is a blessing, but we can't help but wonder if it could not have been stripped back even further to better serve the relentless pace of the game.



Below: The Glory Kills have ended up being less of a spectacle than we first imagined, but that's for the better as they keep the game moving.

Pace is also the issue when you hit some of the slightly imbalanced sections of the game, when enemies seem intent on ruining your fun with attack patterns and modes of movement that run counter to the fun, anarchic battle that disguises hidden depths of tactical approach. We grew to increasingly loathe the Arch-Viles and their wall-penetrating attacks as well as their warping around the maps in areas where reaching them became a chore. Even the Imps could be annoying if there was one left to kill before a door would open and they were hanging out in some corner of the map you hadn't reached for some reason.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SNAP CHAT: The mode creation suite of Snapmap has the potential to give *Doom* a long life, but it might need more tools added over time. It's worth coming back to find out what people are sharing.

These are all essentially issues of flow being interrupted, because when *Doom* is at its best it just keeps moving. Even the platforming sections are about keeping things chugging along, as are the hidden secrets throughout the game that encourage you to search every nook. The Glory kills, which attracted so much pre-release interest and acclaim, actually become a little tiresome and unremarkable the more you use them, but they do keep things moving. There's no greater salve to low health and ammo than spotting a wayward Imp or Hellknight and taking them out with a quick animated headstomp. These animations appear to have been sped up from pre-release footage and that's great, because they don't feel intrusive. In a balance between impact as a spectacle and working as a game mechanic, id has chosen the later and should be commended for it.

Multiplayer is similarly gameplay-focused, but concerns that it lacked a truly *Doom* flavour at beta stage have sadly not changed. It's light, fast and engaging a lot of the time, with plenty of classic arena battling fun to be had, but it feels a little toothless. The single-player campaign is very solid and the online multiplayer offers some interest, but it actually feels a little by the numbers. Loadouts might give you the false impression that this is drawing from the modern shooter crowd, but the fact that the first recommended package leads with a rocket launcher indicates a lot about how id thinks you should be playing. It just hasn't settled into its stride yet.

And Snapmap is going to need a little more time to really deliver some interest. It's clearly not as comprehensive as previous *Doom* map editors on PC, but for making weird game modes on the fly it has a lot of potential that we're sure will be fulfilled soon. While we wouldn't go anywhere near as far as to say that this online facing side of the game is an afterthought, it doesn't carry with it the same sense of intense playtesting and meticulous detail as the solo campaign. One feels honed by years of trial and error. The other feels like it was built with confidence, but not necessarily the same passion.

BETTER THAN
HALO 5: GUARDIANS



AS GOOD AS
WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

FAQs

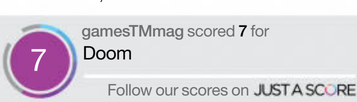
Q. IS IT PROPER DOOM?
It has all the staples of the series, that's for sure.

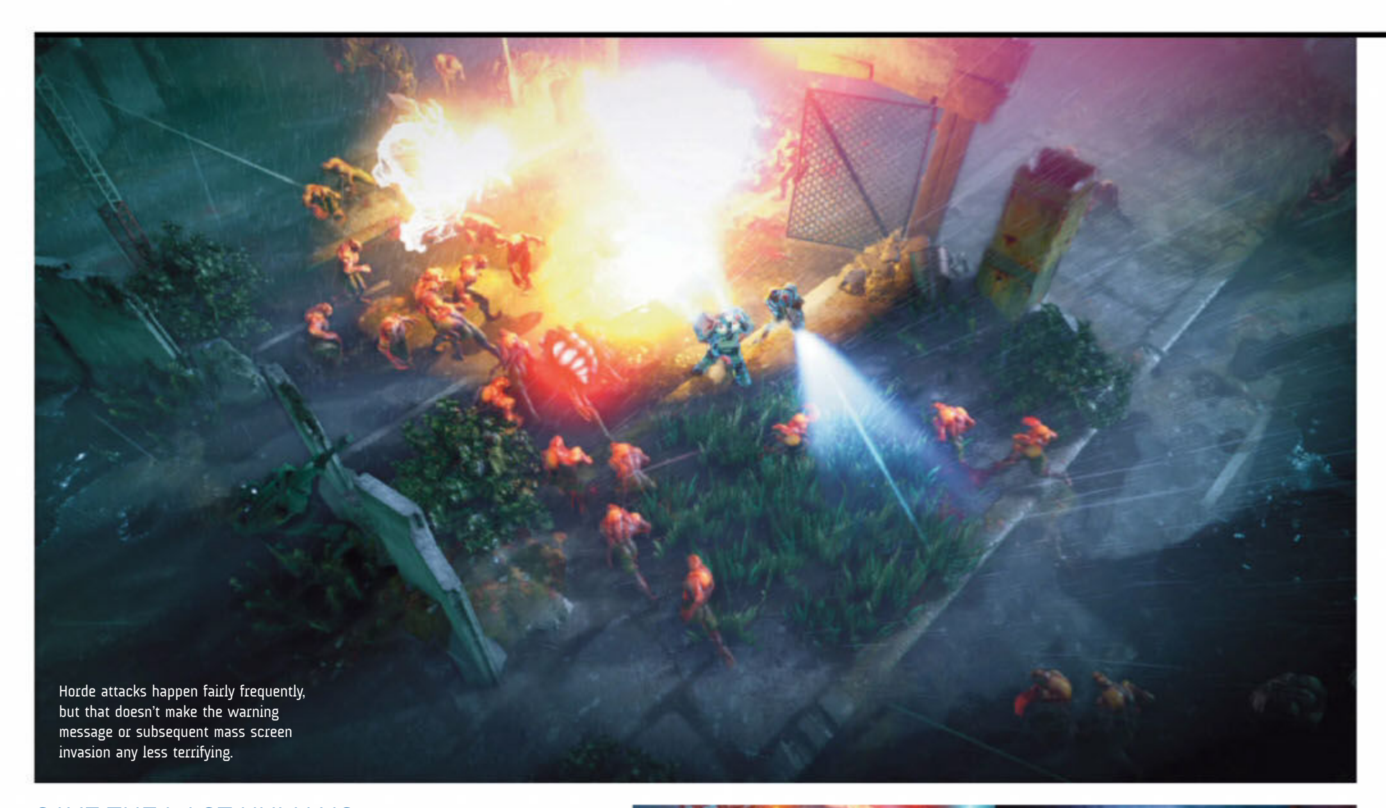
Q. HOW DOES IT LOOK?
Graphically, it's very impressive indeed. It's gorgeous in a gut-wrenchingly nasty sort of way.

Q. AND THE MULTIPLAYER?
Satisfying enough and not just a cookie-cutter retread of modern shooter ideas, but not inspiring.

VERDICT

A FUN, ENGAGING THROWBACK WITH A FEW FLAWS




Horde attacks happen fairly frequently, but that doesn't make the warning message or subsequent mass screen invasion any less terrifying.

SAVE THE LAST HUMANS

Alienation

The mad scientists of development are always finding new ways to splice genres and create freakish new hybrids, but the results are always impossible to predict. More often than not, there's a colourful puff of smoke as disparate elements are combined, revealing some ill-advised abomination as it dissipates. But occasionally, the forces of good science prevail. The likes of rhythm-action dungeon crawler *Crypt Of The Necrodancer* and match-three RPG *Puzzle Quest* are great examples and while Housemarque's latest isn't quite such a revelation, it's at least fair to say that it works far better than a combination of *Diablo* and *Robotron* has any right to.

Moment-to-moment action benefits greatly from this unholy fusion, dense waves of enemies flooding the screen as you employ a combination of tight twin-stick shooting, class-specific abilities and an assortment of looted weapons to carve through armies of bugs. It starts slow but quickly escalates to the point that you can barely see the screen for laser fire, hazardous goo, explosions and legions of foes, all made even more chaotic by the fact that the camera sits so far from the action. It's a shame, since the models are clearly detailed enough to be used much bigger (as seen in the menus and bestiary) yet this is sacrificed in the interest of offering a broader view of the action. You'll appreciate that breathing room during four-player bedlam, mind.

Housemarque's pedigree shines through in the shooting, then, but the cracks start to show as you're dragged into the cycle of finding and improving your gear. By blending two genres with completely different endgame goals – grinding out incrementally better loot versus repeating stages to grow top scores – *Alienation* ends up offering a gameplay cycle that doesn't match the purity or compulsion of either. Scoring systems are decent enough but it never feels like the main goal as it does in, say, *Resogun*, while the loot pool doesn't appear to be deep enough to support the kind of long-term grind that keeps players glued to *Diablo* to this day. The upshot is that a wider cross-section of players are initially attracted, but it's unlikely to hold your attention for as long as your favourite pure loot- or score-driven equivalent.

Electing to champion effects over fluidity, a generally solid 30fps allows Housemarque more technical freedom. Beams, blasts and bursts of all shapes, sizes and colours lick across the screen, the hardware only slightly struggling towards the busier tail end of the game. Chuck in a *Souls*-inspired invasion mechanic and *Gears*-style active reloads to make intense battles even more stressful and you've got an entertaining twin-stick loot-shooter – while certainly not Housmarque's best game, it's comfortably its most ambitious and it's pleasantly surprising to see so many of the team's risks pay off.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Housemarque
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

GAUNTLET





WORSE THAN

DIABLO III: REAPER OF SOULS



MISSING LINK

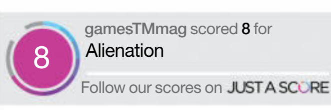
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LONELY PLANET: Sadly, there's no option for local co-op – if you don't want to go it alone, playing online is your only option.

SO FAR AWAY: A particularly shy camera means your field of view can be flooded with enemies, but it also means everything feels tiny and detail is lost.

VERDICT

A SHORT BUT UNIQUELY BRILLIANT STRATEGY SHOOTER





Above: If you found *Borderlands* and its sequel amusing, that's no guarantee that you're going to warm to this wisecracking mob. Devoid of any desire to tell a story, Gearbox simply piles aggressive catchphrase upon aggressive catchphrase, ad infinitum.

TORN TO BE WILD

Battleborn

There are few adjectives in this world more subjective than "annoying", but *Battleborn*'s campaign bucks its user-friendly status quo to deliver a shooter that isn't even slightly interested in accommodating casual players. What's more, in its own way it's as fatuous and poorly conceived as *Colonial Marines* was; a situation that's exacerbated by the fact that you're apparently supposed to grind through it a frankly insane number of times. It may have been touted during 2K's marketing blitzkrieg as the most generous and varied FPS package this side of *Call Of Duty* ("Play solo! Play competitive! Play co-op!") but *Battleborn* doesn't even clear the first hurdle.

Structured in a vaguely similar way to *Destiny*'s often breathtaking strikes, each of the game's eight missions works as a mild primer for the multiplayer and nothing else. You're led through a parade of massive spaces that are spectacularly good-looking while also being monotonous and empty, to do battle with either waves of enemies or an oversimplified boss. The beautiful (and varied) skyboxes do an amazing job of convincing you that you aren't just battling in a shifting library of big empty rooms, but the level of repetition on display is tiresome. Mercifully, your character's witless incidental dialogue can be switched off, but the list of in-your-face irritants is long. Stampeding attackers persistently knock your projectiles sideways when they aren't walloping you off cliffs. Enemies can occasionally spawn beneath scenery, which means that clear-out missions are impossible to complete; even if you're 35 minutes deep, the only option is to restart because there are no checkpoints.

Health is just another collectible, so if there's a relentless trinket hoover on your team – and there almost always is – your ability to stay alive may depend on your ability to ignore combat. One enemy type is modelled on the Flood from *Halo: Combat Evolved*, the least welcome videogame comeback since *Duke Nukem*. And matchmaking in co-op restricts you from actually choosing a level, plumping instead for a voting system that could hypothetically leave your chosen missions incomplete forever. Although Gearbox has used its bright, eye-catching aesthetic, this most certainly isn't *Borderlands*.

But *Borderlands* wasn't a rip-roaring 'hero shooter', and *Battleborn* flourishes

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

THE COMBAT IS SO HECTIC THAT THERE'S RARELY TIME TO CONSIDER WHAT'S HAPPENING ELSEWHERE

Left: It's terrific that two-player split-screen has been included, but at present the frame-rate can border on the headache-inducing.

Below: The game opens with an unskippable music video in place of an intro cutscene. It's beautifully animated, but seriously overlong.



pretty skilfully in that department. Although the selection of modes and maps is meagre at present – three modes, with two dedicated maps apiece – Gearbox is using the season pass for non-competitive content and giving the new characters and maps away for free.

If *Battleborn* can be heartily commended for anything, it's that the characters – all 25 of them – provide genuinely contrasting ways of playing. Picking the right five combatants makes for a great tactical game, and just when you think you've hit upon the perfect formula for success, you face off against a rival unit that effortlessly bludgeons your team into the ether. It's a tedious cliché to say that a multiplayer shooter "demands teamwork", but in *Battleborn* it usually takes less than a minute to spot a communicating five-person side. With vastly different attacks and loadouts – and everything from long-range snipers to melee specialists and numerous variants in between – victory comes when you constantly alter the manner in which your team combines to complement each other.

However, the game's much-discussed utilisation of MOBA elements turns out to be something of a red herring. Incursion, which sees two teams working to destroy each other's base sentries on maps that coalesce into a single lane, never gifts you with a broad enough overview of the battle. The mini-map is mystifyingly small, and the combat is so hectic that there's rarely time to consider what's happening elsewhere. This is a fresh and savvy online multiplayer shooter, to be certain, but it's too focused on the here and now – and too reliant on its own gunplay – to seriously warrant a comparison with even a basic, free-to-play MOBA. But rarely before has first-person chaos been rendered this well.

The sheer visual pandemonium of what occurs when all ten players are engaged in a gigantic brawl – flanked by at least as many AI lackeys – feels like it could crash two consoles, let alone one, and yet there's never a hint of slowdown or any vanishing textures. *Battleborn* might never be an eSports cash cow, but you have to admire the fact that it was ready to go straight out of the gate.

Meltdown, which sees both teams working to chaperone (and then incinerate) briskly respawning minions as quickly as possible, is a tactical blast that's bolstered no end by the inclusion of multiple pathways, with small (but ingeniously placed) sheltered hotspots for melee characters to do serious damage in. Capture is a straightforward riff on Domination/Conquest and is solidly compelling, even though it feels desperately old hat next to the competition.

It's a crushing shame that matchmaking isn't currently level-based, because it's not uncommon for a team of newcomers to get thrown up against a squad that includes players who've ranked up beyond tier 50 in seemingly record time. This issue will hopefully be remedied in due course, and with plentiful free DLC due over the coming months, *Battleborn* does admittedly feel like it's just getting started. Lone wolves may have their work cut out if they want to compete – it really is a team-based experience – but any curious parties who balked at the launch price are advised to keep an eye trained on its evolution. This isn't over yet.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LESS IS MORE: Who else would rather have an enhanced multiplayer suite instead of a flat and exhausting campaign? The illusion of being a "complete" package makes *Battleborn* look worse, not better.

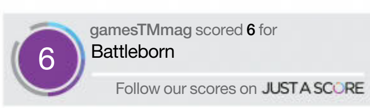
NEXT LEVELLING

Aside from Incursion mode, *Battleborn*'s other MOBA-inspired element is its dynamic levelling system. As you reach set XP tiers during each multiplayer match (or co-op mission) you're given a choice of two augments, displayed on a cartoon DNA helix. The first few choices are usually negligible – eg: a damage boost for a projectile versus more range – but the further you get, the more each choice starts to feel game-changing. It's bizarre that the explanation of what each augment does is often long-winded (and occasionally vague) but it does encourage experimentation.



VERDICT

A PROMISING WORK IN PROGRESS



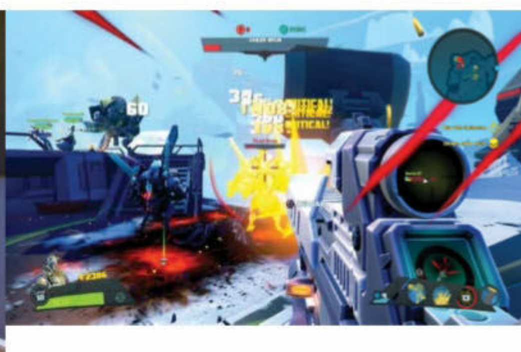
FAQs

Q. CAN I PLAY OFFLINE?
No. You can't even watch the introductory music video unless you're logged in and online. Annoying.

Q. IS THERE LOOT?
Yes. Legendary gear can be found everywhere in the game. Be warned though: there's exclusive gear in the campaign. Yawn.

Q. HOW IS KLEESE UNLOCKED?
All of the game's 25 characters can be unlocked by grinding XP or fulfilling specific, mostly straightforward objectives in multiplayer.





Below: *Battleborn* was developed from the wreckage of the cancelled, Tarantino-inspired *Furious 4*. Although not a great deal is known about that project beyond its utterly goofy tone, based on the E3 2011 demo, the similarities are easy to see.



Above: The use of larger, more powerful units is an interesting shift for *Total War*. They pose more considerable threats that need to be dealt with first.

DECISIVE VICTORY

Total War: Warhammer

From time to time the games industry is met with a videogame concept so obvious it makes you wonder it hadn't been done before. Some of these titles might offer an innovation that shifts the way an entire genre is played, some utilise licences or settings well suited to gaming while others – as is the case with *Total War: Warhammer* – are simply a perfect marriage of a reputed developer, a particular style of game and a franchise that has been waiting to be used in such a fashion. So the concept here should be pretty obvious from name alone: this is one of the *Total War* games that we're all already so familiar with, combined with the fantasy setting of Game Workshop's tabletop miniatures board game Warhammer. Even if you haven't played either of these, both names transcend any need for hands-on experience.

If you're concerned that such an obvious idea might not work out, then worry not. On the *Total War* front it's much the same as it ever has been, with the campaign view for building and maintaining your army and economy and the battle mode for real-time strategic melees largely unchanged – at least on a mechanical level. In that sense the Warhammer setting merely provides a veneer through which you can use that traditional *Total War* gameplay. You'll pick a faction, raise an army, vie for control over the campaign map and ultimately achieve victory – or not, depending on your abilities as a commander. The setting does come with its own elements, rules and particulars that need to be learned, and in that sense there's perhaps more to learn for a veteran *Total War* player than usual. With that said, the core features are so similar it'll quickly become second nature.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, Dual Core 3GHz CPU, 1GB DirectX 11 GPU, 3GB RAM, 35GB HDD Space,
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

CREATIVE ASSEMBLY HAS HAD A BIT MORE FREEDOM WITH WHICH TO HAVE SOME FUN AND IT MAKES FOR A COMPELLING RELEASE

What is most interesting is how the Warhammer theme affects the way the game plays out. *Total War* became the name it is today by gamifying history, by turning the methodical nature of classical warfare into something more mechnical, more manageable, more amusing. But here, with a board game as its base, it's not having to gamify nearly as much; Creative Assembly has had a bit more freedom with which to have some fun and it makes for a compelling release for the series. It still ties heavily into the familiar rock-paper-scissors format of unit control that has proved so consistent for the franchise, but with enough subtle

FAQs

Q. A GOOD STORY?

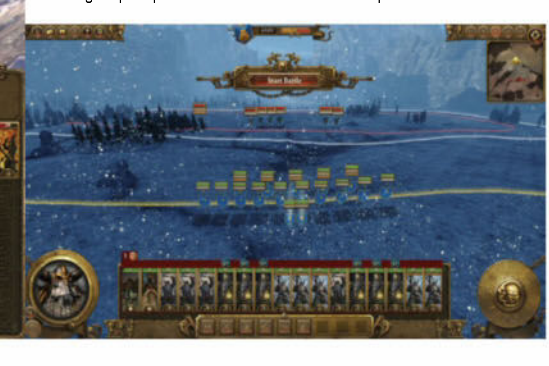
Not really. Despite the intriguing opening cutscenes and the various other ones spliced throughout, once you're on the campaign map it's kind of forgettable.

Q. IS THAT BAD?

No, of course not. *Total War* as a franchise relies on its replayability, and too heavy a focus on storyline would only hold this one back.

Q. GAME LONGEVITY?

With four factions, different characters within each and the personally set goals 4X games often rely on, this game will certainly keep you going for hours.



Left: Battles reward loot, but also a chance for trinkets and runes. Heroes and other units can be equipped with these to improve their abilities in a battle, making for perhaps the most RPG-centric *Total War* experience ever.



Below: In-game cutscenes appear periodically throughout the campaign, but do little to add tension. The music and shifting atmosphere of the areas, however, really helps create a sense of identity as you conquer the world map.

changes that things aren't quite as simple to grasp as they once were. Take, for example, the varied races open to you from the start: by being free of historical accuracy there is so much more difference between the different factions that each one will provide a distinctly different playstyle. The Dwarves, for example, feature 'Grudges', essentially quests that guide the player towards particular actions. Have too many of these at any one time and dissonance will grow among your civilization, impacting your cities, their growth and – ultimately – leading to rebellion that will need to be tackled. The Orcs, however, feature a system that penalises them for failing to participate in battle, with any given army's 'Fightiness' dropping over time, ultimately leading to in-fighting and reducing numbers. This results in a far more aggressive playstyle than the rest of the factions, and highlights the contrast each faction has.

There are some issues with this, admittedly. Early on it can be difficult for some races to counteract armies with more advanced units, not due to their strength but their play style. Early Dwarf armies are slow and heavy, and it will be a while before the likes of gyrocopters are to hand to help take out faster enemy units. It can be frustrating to find yourself encountering the same army numerous times simply because you weren't able to fully chase down and eliminate waves of mounted units, and that awkward balancing requires relearning a little of the way *Total War* should be played.

The fact that each faction has its own individuality alone should make for a much more fulfilling campaign experience, but there's a greater sense of storytelling here too. In lessons learned from *Rome II*, Creative Assembly has built a much more robust set of story missions, with each faction – and even units within those factions – having their own specific battles to deal with. Some cross over with one another, but the result is often the same: a particular challenge to overcome under certain conditions. Often they guide the overall campaign away from your own plans and can sometimes feel a little throwaway, but at least provide enough of a distraction to add some variety and help to build in the deep lore of the Warhammer setting.

Outside of these wider changes there are myriad other tweaks and alterations to the typical *Total War* experience. Hero characters have a greater impact than just morale boosts, counting as much more integral units on the battlefield, often with important abilities and even spells to help turn the tide of war. Spells in particular offer a huge impact, and smaller armies with access to powerful spells – and in situations where the Winds of Magic allow – can easily hold their own against a full-stack 20-unit army. Alterations to building construction and research trees again have their own faction flavours, but are implemented in an simpler fashion – an important feature when considering everything new that a *Total War* fan will need to figure out. In truth, as a *Total War* game it doesn't do anything all that new, but something about this pairing just works – as we all expected it would. It's a testament to the game's design that, no matter whether your a fan of *Total War* or Warhammer, you'll get something new and fresh out of this.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD: The Warhammer setting does more than enough to distinguish it from other *Total War* games, but there are tweaks and improvements under the hood to the familiar gameplay too.

CHAOS AND CORRUPTION

There was something of a controversy surrounding the announcement of the *Chaos Warriors* pre-order DLC, with many claiming the faction should be a separate playable faction completely and not restricted to DLC. While it has now been offered for free for the first week of launch, the matter of the fact is that the Chaos acts as more akin to the Huns in *Total War: Attila*. The Chaos faction – entirely independent of your own races – will build a large force and attempt to spread out from the north, requiring each of the four factions to participate in the world's defence where possible. It's an interesting feature and one that utilises the lore of Warhammer – and Chaos in general – extremely well.

BETTER THAN

BATTLEFLEET GOTHIC: ARMADA



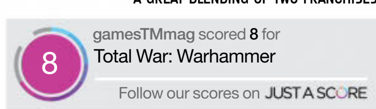


WORSE THAN

WARHAMMER: DAWN OF WAR II

VERDICT

A GREAT BLENDING OF TWO FRANCHISES



WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE KIDDING, NORTH KOREA?

Homefront: The Revolution

Here you are, ostensibly a new recruit into the desperate fight to retake America, and yet you're able to glide through the game's missions, sidequests and challenges with ease, washing through occupied Philadelphia like a biblical flood. When you arrive, the whole city is in North Korean hands. After a single hour of play, you've destroyed countless enemy installations and reclaimed entire neighbourhoods. You start to question how the occupation ever gained a foothold in the first place.

Homefront: The Revolution suffers from inconsistency of tone. Never do you feel like part of a movement, a groundswell or a Resistance. In *Homefront: The Revolution*, you're a lone hero, capable of toppling entire platoons of enemy forces single-handed. Myriad tools are at your disposal. You have customisable weapons, sophisticated gadgets and a mobile phone that can scan enemies and automatically gather intelligence. Conversely, the occupiers are ill-prepared and perpetually weak. Rather than the underdog, forced to use hit and run ambushes and guerrilla tactics, you feel like Captain Price, Soap and Ghost rolled into one, armed with weapons technology that easily overpowers an inferior force. Gunfights sound great and *Homefront* manages several of the shooter basics, like decent blood effects and death physics and a simple, credible cover system. But you may as well be playing *Far Cry*, *Just Cause* or *Skyrim*. You are the solo, unfailing saviour of the world – *Homefront*'s supporting characters stop just short of calling you "the Chosen One."

That inconsistency is reflected in *Homefront*'s level design. Philadelphia is impressively modelled and thanks to the CryEngine's superlative lighting effects looks wonderful at night. But it's a painfully contrived world, so filled with assignments, missions and general stuff

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Xbox One, PC, Mac
OTHER FORMATS: UK
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Dambuster Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

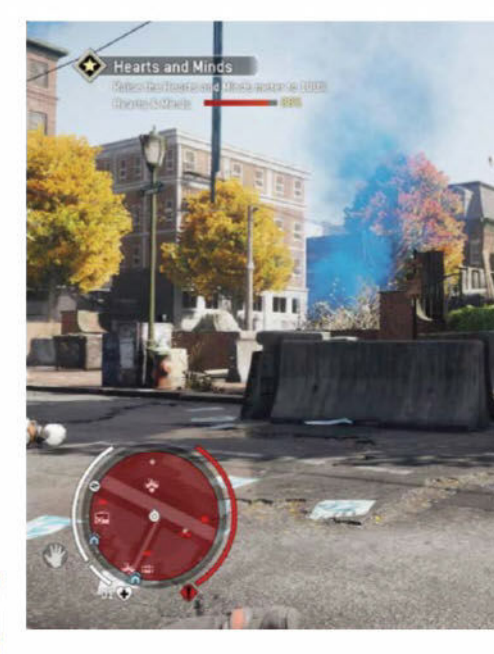
FAR CRY 3



AS GOOD AS



FREEDOM FIGHTERS



Above: Guns are frightening and loud – their reports echo down the empty streets of war-torn Philadelphia. That kind of sound design is one of *Homefront*'s highlights.

Below: The city of Philadelphia is well realised and very striking, particularly at night. Its citizens, however, rarely feel like real people.



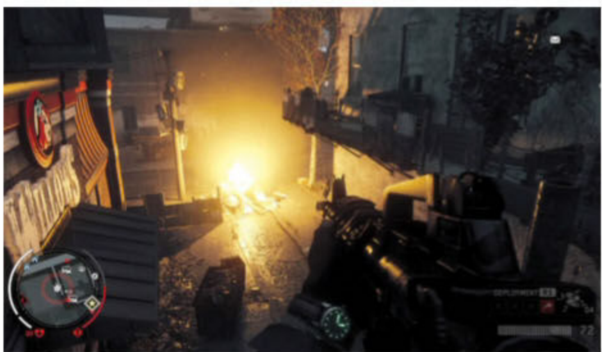
FAQs

Q. IS THIS A FULL OPEN WORLD?
Yes, but the game's version of Philadelphia is split into sections, self-contained hubs, not unlike *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, that you must pass through loading screens to access

Q. DO YOU CONTROL A SQUAD?
Not as such. You can recruit AI resistance members and they will follow you into battle (and actually make a pretty good fist of things) but you can't order them directly

Q. IS THERE A LOT TO DO?
Collectibles, enemy outposts and optional missions are scattered everywhere, so there are always icons on your map that need scoring off. But it's a very "videogame" world, more *Just Cause* than *Grand Theft Auto*.

Below: Enemies make some dumb moves and get especially confused if you attack from above. Typically you can kill swathes of them without problems.



EMBRACE THE RESISTANCE

Homefront: The Revolution suffers from a similar problem as its (largely forgotten) 2010 namesake. The original *Homefront*, also set inside an occupied America and casting the player as a resistance fighter, played far too much like *Call Of Duty*. Weapons were plentiful, ammo was everywhere and enemies could be killed easily, en masse. You felt like a soldier. In *The Revolution*, too, you never get the sense that you're the underdog. You're consistently well supplied and can even customise your guns with holographic sights, suppressors and all of that special forces, *COD*-type stuff. More interesting would have been a game where you felt often, and genuinely powerless. Whether players, who have become accustomed to being the badass and the hero, would have taken to it is a different question.



YOU ARE THE SOLO, UNFAILING SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD – HOMEFRONT'S SUPPORTING CHARACTERS STOP JUST SHORT OF CALLING YOU 'THE CHOSEN ONE'

for you to do that it can only feel artificial. Again, you never get the sense of an occupation, or a downtrodden population fighting for freedom. For *Homefront* to work, the city needs to feel worth fighting for, as if something has been lost – or is being destroyed – due to the invaders.

But this Philadelphia is essentially a playground, expressly and noticeably designed for gun fights and exploration. Its streets are littered with flashing icons and collectible junk. Its buildings are plastic, functional places, serving only as hubs for buying weapons and choosing jobs. And the people are robotic. While the recurring Resistance characters recite clichéd, expository dialogue, the general population either stands idle or acts as a mere component to one of your missions. They are hostages, they are prisoners, they are a collective mind that you must arouse into rebellion by completing X number of sidequests, but the civilians of Philly never feel like *people*. Everything in *Homefront* – the sense of progression and agency, the presumed desire for content – is designed around second-guessing what the players might want. Some might call this efficient videogame design. But when attrition, disempowerment and struggle are *Homefront*'s supposed narrative themes, the gold standards of open-world game-making no longer apply. On the contrary, they are jarringly out of place.

Undeniably, *Homefront* has its moments. Even more impressive is that they often happen organically – if the overarching levels are marred by uneven writing, the comparatively unscripted act of roaming Philadelphia often leads to exciting vignettes. Turning a corner and walking headlong into an NK patrol creates a perfectly unpredictable and scrappy gunfight, as everybody fumbles for their pistols and tries to get to cover. Occasionally, you'll find a lone NK trooper who's been separated from his squad. Picking him off with a single rifle round, which echoes down the street, then leaving his body stranded in the middle of the road feels appropriately grubby.

If *Homefront* is trying to be shocking (and judging by its opening cutscene, it's trying hard) then moments like these are what really make you truly feel it. The game, at its best, is relentlessly bleak, filled with swift, random acts of violence amongst dirty, destroyed buildings. It's only when it pushes hard that *Homefront* falls flat. The sequences where – heaven forfend – the Resistance commits atrocities, sometimes against its own people, are designed to lend ambiguity and high drama to the game's otherwise rote story. But they're ham-fisted and obvious: when the Resistance's doctor admonishes you over the civilian casualties your war is causing, *Homefront* may as well prompt "Press X to self-doubt".

Surprisingly – considering how multiplayer shooters are normally a rat race to see which individual can get the most points and unlock the most abilities – *Homefront*'s narrative conceits play strongest when you team up with friends. As a squad of four, you co-operate to conquer various mini-missions, capturing strongholds, reclaiming territory, etc. Here, you actually feel like you're fighting as part of a group. If *Homefront* struggles to create a sense of community in its campaign, it's easy to imagine that you and three friends, should you play long enough, will form a working dynamic with one person handling demolitions, one doing crowd control, one sniping and one acting as healer. It's a smart move by Dambuster. Very easily the studio could have cast one team as Resistance, the other as North Korea and created a typical multiplayer game.

There are dozens of reasons to like *Homefront: The Revolution*. It has technical problems – slowed frame-rate, texture pop-in – but they strangely add to the game's dirty, tired aesthetic. Similarly, the abortive, occasionally messy gunfights feel appropriately amateur. Though the guns themselves are lifted from *COD* and *Battlefield*, actually using them feels suitably awkward. But still, *Homefront*'s masses of open-world content and staid narrative drag it down. It's an overburdened, graceless game struggling to tell a story that requires a defter approach.

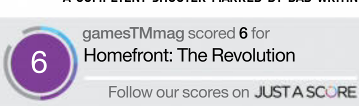
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HEARTS AND MINDS: It lacks a convincing, credible story. There are attempts to balance the war out, to make the Resistance seem just as ghastly as the North Korean invaders, but they're ham-fisted and feel so scripted.

VERDICT

A COMPETENT SHOOTER MARRED BY BAD WRITING



EVERY ACTION HAS A DISASTROUS REACTION

Fire Emblem Fates

***Fire Emblem* is a series that thrives on backing the player into a corner at every opportunity,** forcing you to make brutal choices that not only affect the outcome of the narrative but of the lives and relationships of those that you hold closest. Never has the pressure to deliver on the battlefield felt so demanding, as emotionally taxing as it does here in *Fire Emblem Fates*. It's a difficult tactical RPG that rewards the bold, and punishes just about any player that dares play it.

While many of the mechanics are comfortably familiar (it won't take long for *Awakening* fans to adjust), you've never played a game quite like *Fates*. It's an experience comprised of three games that diverge at a critical junction, just a handful of hours into the story. It's a difficult decision to make so early on, forcing you to decide where your loyalties lie. At this point, you'll have bought at least one version of the story, and you can choose to continue with this one or purchase one of the other two options that are left. It's a huge decision, too, defining the tone of the campaign, the difficulty and the path that your hero pursues.

We did, admittedly, have our concerns that this was fuelled by business intent rather than a choice made in service of the player. A decision made, not in earnest, but in the hope that Intelligent Systems could take *Pokémon*'s successful generational split to a new extreme. Thankfully, we couldn't have been more wrong. *Fates* delivers three captivating stories across the versions, with the entire experience working to cultivate a narrative arc that constantly leaves you questioning the road not taken.

That's because *Fates* forces you to side with one of two factions at war for land and honour. After just a few short hours of introductions to Nohr, your adopted family and the quintessential bad guys, and Hoshido, the rebel nation built by your blood relatives, you will need to make a decision that affects the tens of hours in front of you. Side with Nohr and you'll be heading off to siege the land in *Conquest*, decide to fight for your freedom and family, you'll want to choose *Birthright*. Decide that you hate both factions and want to go your own way? Then you can always play the digital-only *Revelation* path.

DETAILS

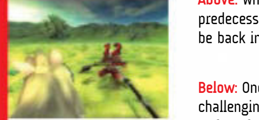
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

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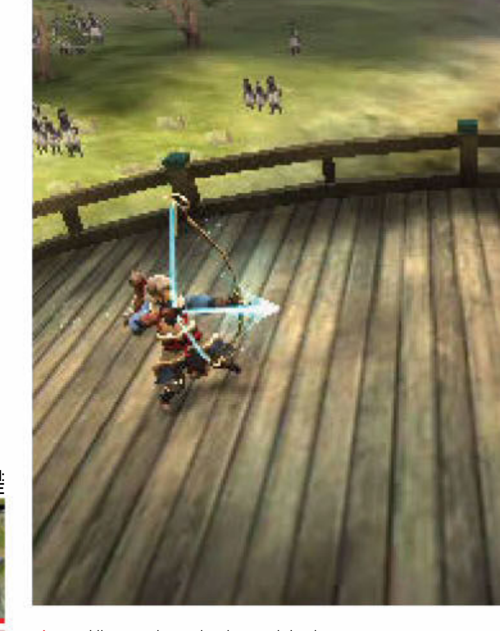
FIRE EMBLEM: PATH OF RADIANCE



WORSE THAN



FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING



Above: While *Fates* doesn't break ground that its predecessor, *Awakening*, hasn't already it's great to be back in an all-new *Fire Emblem* adventure.

Below: One reason the *Conquest* campaign is so challenging is that it fails to give you opportunities to farm for experience, meaning you need to treat every battle like it might be your last.



REGARDLESS OF THE PATH YOU TAKE IN FATES, YOU'RE GETTING THE FULL FIRE EMBLEM EXPERIENCE

FAQs

Q. SHOULD I PLAY ALL THREE?
It'll take you a hundred-odd hours, but each of the three campaigns are worth playing through.

Q. CAN I JUMP STRAIGHT INTO REVELATION?
While you could, you won't understand the ramifications of your actions without the context the other campaigns bring.

Q. GOOD FOR BEGINNERS?
As long as you stick to the *Birthright* campaign, *Fates* is perfect for beginners to the series, offering helpful tutorials along the way.

Below: *Fire Emblem Fates* is a beautiful looking adventure, once again showing that there's plenty of life left in the 3DS yet.

Regardless of the path you choose, you're getting the full *Fire Emblem* experience. Expect multi-hour missions in your push towards resolution and many a tear to be shed as your comrades fall through indecision. The *Conquest* and *Birthright* campaigns feel distinct, and are certainly the main attraction if you're just joining the fray. They force you to confront the severity of your decision; the family you side against will become your enemy in battle and this is a war that takes no prisoners.

There's always another side to the story in war, and *Fates* gives you the opportunity to live it. But be warned, while you might spend the first play through wondering what friendships and relationships could have been should you have taken a different path, it's all the more difficult to face off against former friends and partners on the opposing front line.

The dramatic moments in *Fates* are largely engrossing, even if many of the story beats are eye-roll-inducing, forcing you to confront tough moral decisions and tactical choices throughout the adventure. *Conquest* offers a tougher challenge, the difficulty ramped up to reflect the stronger medieval military archetypes under your command, while the composition of *Birthright*'s Hoshidan army – Asian warriors, ninjas and samurai – will often mean you're forced to approach battles using stealth.

Birthright probably offers the best campaign of the three. It's engineered to give you exciting battles that, while never easy, always seem fair. It also gives you ample opportunity to cultivate strong Support relationships and foster new bloodlines across the enormous cast of characters, which is still one of the franchise's best features. *Conquest*, on the other hand, can be gruelling and daunting (perfect for series veterans), as this path seems to actively ensure that one of your troops dies per battle, gone forever in the flash of a blade. In fact, a character dying has an even bigger impact than ever before as the Support relationships you build offer huge in-game benefits and tactical variety to your squad. Greater affinity between two characters will ensure they receive and deliver stronger support and protection when paired up with a buddy.

Outside of battle, you'll have the opportunity to interact with your troops and deal with the needlessly complicated class adoption mechanic (used to help shape characters into their strategic prime form) in your own customisable castle. It's a big addition, though it feels a little underdeveloped; here you can manage and decorate your castle grounds, building and upgrading helpful structures (such as shops and an armoury) and fostering friendships from the comfort of your private quarters. It's an interesting addition, but it doesn't feel like it brings anything to the table that couldn't have been achieved in a town or communal hub area – it's also frustrating to put all that work into building it, only for it to be lost when you begin a second or third campaign.

Fire Emblem Fates is a challenging, deep and engrossing turn-based RPG with huge narrative ambitions. That single choice made at the beginning of your adventure has huge ramifications, and *Fates* spends many hours pondering the pitfalls of it. Intelligent Systems may have failed to improve troop management over *Awakening*, but it has once again built a game that succeeds on the strength of its punishing, rewarding tactical prowess. Every decision, in combat and outside of it, has a consequence and *Fates* takes pride in forcing you to live, love and fight with every single one of them on your shoulders.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STORY SPLIT Branching narrative: set across three unique storylines, *Fire Emblem Fates* delivers a series of tough and thoughtful narrative arcs.

IT'S TOUGH TO BE A LEADER

One major downside to *Fire Emblem Fates* is that it's difficult to know whether you are ever actually managing your troops correctly. While there's instant satisfaction to be found in the moment-to-moment action, actually developing a character to increase their chance of survival can be a lesson in futility. Six different (and stupidly rare) Master Seals are used to promote characters through advanced classes, but a brief (and mostly unhelpful) tutorial fails to explain this integral system with any real clarity. Knowing when to promote units, ideal class direction and stat strengths isn't clear; it's all too difficult to make an essentially irreversible mistake with one of your favourite heroes.

VERDICT
A TOUGH, TACTICAL ADVENTURE

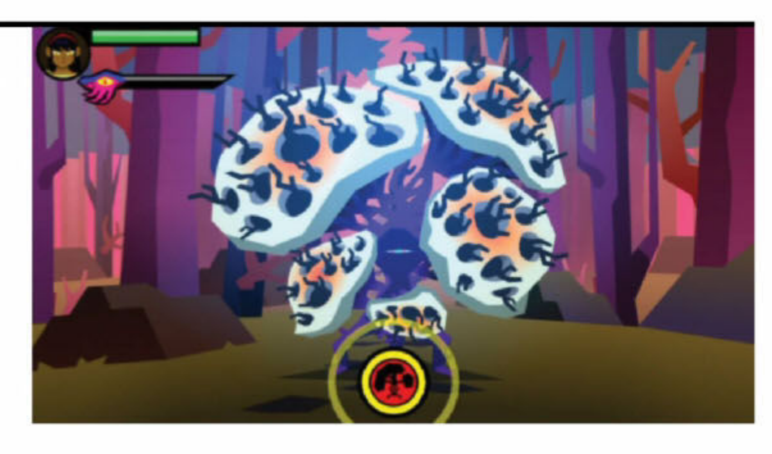
8
gamesTMmag scored 8 for Fire Emblem Fates
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE





FRUIT NINJA + ZELDA

Severed



Beautiful, bold and eerily haunting, *Severed* puts us in the samurai shoes of Sasha, a young warrior who we meet as she staggers home, clutching the bloodied stump that was her right arm. To add insult to injury she finds her house in ruins and family missing, the fate of whom forms the crux of the game's quest. *Severed* successfully combines first-person and RPG elements, much like the dungeon crawlers of old. But where the likes of *Ultima Underworld* would leave movement and combat to keyboard presses, here the Vita's touchscreen is used to add a modern twist. Anyone who has played *Fruit Ninja* will be instantly familiar with the combat system. Swiping a finger across the touchscreen governs the directions of your slash, while the length of the swipe dictates the damage inflicted.

Things get complicated when enemies begin to defend themselves against your blows, either with physical defence – a monkey-like monster encountered early on will use its four arms to block swipes in certain directions – or with numeric superiority. By the end of the game it's not unusual to be combating four, five or six monsters at once. Once this happens, *Severed* becomes an ultra-violent game of micromanagement, as hostiles attack from every direction. Success depends upon repelling attacks, exploiting the weaknesses of the various enemies and negating any magical buffs lending them a helping hand.

Against such odds, death is inevitable. But a game that could have become a frustrating slog is redeemed thanks to a generous autosave feature that will return you to the room just prior to where you were overcome. The downside to this is an absence of tension. It's often easier to let a particularly fearsome group of creatures kill you if you're low on health, triggering Sasha to respawn – fully healed – before you can so much as whisper 'harakiri'.

Lack of tension aside, battles are tactical affairs that reward the skilful player. Landing successive blows fills Sasha's Focus meter and killing a monster at full Focus triggers the titular Severed Mode. Here time slows so that claws, eyes, wings and more can be sliced from your victims – all of which can then be used to level-up Sasha's skills. *Severed*'s sprawling dungeons are intricately designed and, though their puzzles never quite hit the heights of those in a *Zelda* title, exploration yields plenty of hidden secrets. Just don't expect *Fallout*-levels of depth – an exhaustive trek through every room in the game (a necessity to unlock the game's Platinum trophy) will take roughly ten hours. It's conceivable that *Severed* will be the Vita's last 'big' exclusive and DrinkBox has dutifully risen to the occasion, delivering a gorgeous and original title that should keep the Vita on life support for a while longer yet.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: DrinkBox Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

INFINITY BLADE III





WORSE THAN

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK 3D

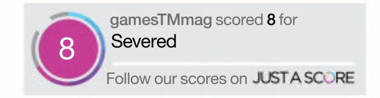
FINGERPRINT

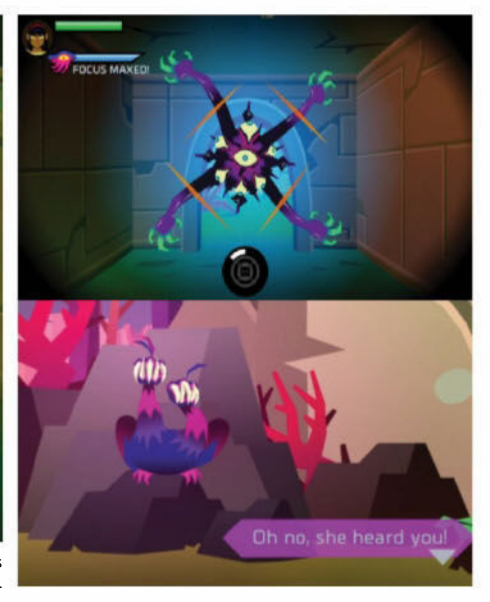
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FINAL CUT: Earning the chance to slice your enemies limb-from-limb is key to boosting Sasha's stats. Enhanced skills and health perks are available to those with the right assortment of monster parts.

VERDICT

A CUT, THRUST AND PARRY ABOVE





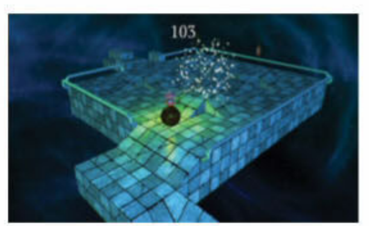
Above: Micro-managing multiple enemies and defending against their unique attacks is key to surviving the game's gruelling encounters
Right: This 'bird' is one of the friendlier characters you'll come across, injecting some much-needed humour into the often sombre proceedings.

A NEW TAKE ON AN OLD VIEWPOINT

Lumo

***Lumo* places you in control of a wizard charged with navigating their way through a large and sprawling dungeon.** With relatively basic visuals and single-room puzzles and platforming, the game cleverly blends classic challenges with new-school levels of variety. And as you effortlessly speed your way through the early rooms you'd be forgiven for thinking that you've already seen all *Lumo* has to offer; it does all feel very familiar.

But despite its simplistic beginnings, *Lumo* gradually serves up a growing array of interesting challenges and puzzles, each more inventive and varied than the last. Basic platforming gives way to water-filled rooms full of switches, conveyor belts with rolling spiked balls, ice-covered floors with spikes and pitfalls, and poison-covered platforms that can only be survived by standing on and rolling a giant ball. It's all rather inventive.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Vita, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Triple Eh?
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
LARA CROFT AND THE TEMPLE OF OSIRIS



WORSE THAN
CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER



Still, as much as it enhances the classic isometric adventure genre with modern gameplay elements, it's also stubbornly retro in areas that will frustrate a modern gamer who doesn't appreciate the nostalgic appeal. *Lumo*'s utter reluctance to betray the genre's fixed isometric viewpoint is the source of much frustration during many of its more challenging platforming rooms.

In all honesty, too much of the difficulty in these rooms is *only* born of your inability to accurately judge distances; if you could swivel the camera around or even above you, all of those tricky jumps would be easy. Intentionally challenging the player with an ineffective viewpoint is a dated technique that's not nearly as tolerable in today's gamer-friendly era. But if you can push past (or learn to appreciate) its many stubbornly old-school traits, including its tough-to-use maps and frequent back-tracking, you'll be treated to a rewarding, albeit short, quest.

FINGERPRINT

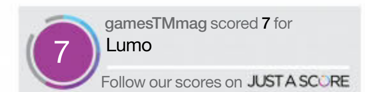
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MINECART MAYHEM: Games with enough creativity that they serve up entirely new gameplay mechanics only to be seen once usually have Nintendo on the box, but *Lumo* draws from so many classics.

The adventure mode, which gives you infinite lives and checkpoints, can be finished within a sitting or two. But honouring the spirit of retro gaming, *Lumo* offers some reply value with an alternate 'Old-school' mode, which hits you with a finite number of lives and no ability to save your progress. Die too many times and you'll find yourself thrown mercilessly back to the start. This is a challenge that's tough enough to provide plenty of replay value for those that dare attempt it. *Lumo* can be frustrating – repeated deaths in rooms force you to retread old ground – but for every maddening moment there are numerous engagingly creative ones.

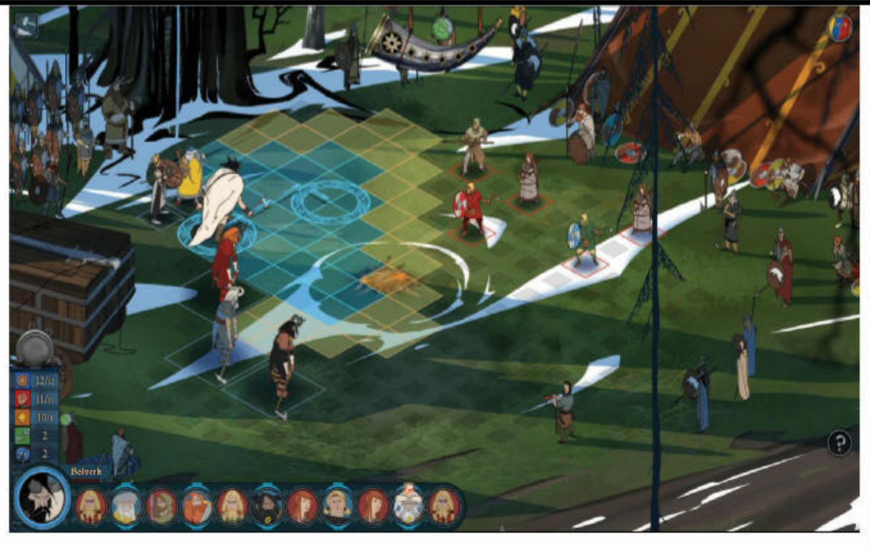
VERDICT

CHARMING, CREATIVE AND STUBBORNLY OLD-SCHOOL



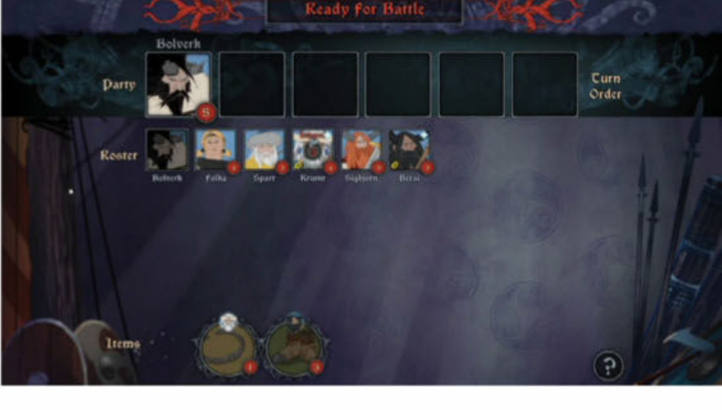


Left The game lulls you into a false sense of security with pushover challenges in the earlier rooms. But the difficulty later cranks up to devilish levels, with lasers and UFOs and flame throwers and pits of poison. Much death awaits.





Above: Bland battles were a key issue with the original game. In the sequel battles have been improved with environmental challenges, specific mission objectives and new characters with different abilities.



ANOTHER SMALL STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The Banner Saga 2

Thankfully, *The Banner Saga 2* picks up immediately after the thrilling events of the original. Here you are on a mighty adventure, leading a band of fighters, scavengers and terrified refugees as they flee from the invading Dredge, a vast army of demonic, murderous stone warriors. Yes, fans of the first game, it's still classic fantasy fare, wrapped up in a tactical RPG format and presented in an utterly breath-taking art style, and it's still just as captivating.

The beautiful adventure has you primarily dealing with an almost constant stream of text-based decisions as the intricate and wonderfully-written story unfolds. Your decisions don't appear to affect the main arc of the story a great deal, but can have major short-term consequences as you try to manage supplies, the training of fighters, the promotion of hero characters and the day-to-day challenges you face during the many perils of your journey.

Rarely are the decisions you face black and white in nature. And, as you strive to make the best decisions for your camp, they game will often spring nasty surprises on you that you simply couldn't have predicted. This, frustratingly, can make the decision-making process a game of utter guesswork. It's impossible to be 'correct' all the time, inevitably leading to the deaths of your people and frequent dips in morale. *The Banner Saga 2* isn't a happy game, then; it's knowingly rather morose.

This feeling of occasional cluelessness also carries over the battles to some degree. At the start of each encounter you have to pick the characters for your squad, but you'll do so without being given any real information on the battle at hand. More experienced players will pick the units that fit their tactics garnered from the first game, but for beginners it's a complete shot in the dark.

Once you're in battle, though, the bread-and-butter strategy is solid. While largely unchanged from the first game, combat is somewhat improved with better balanced attacks and powers, new items, new enemies, and an entire new race; the Horseborn's greater mobility offers new strategic potential. Some battles are also livened up with mission-based objectives, escort missions, unique environmental obstacles and interactive elements, adding some much needed variety to the repetitive nature of the first game.

The Banner Saga 2 sticks closely to the formula of the original, with stunning art, an intricate story and a solid battle system. The plot can be tough to follow at times, while the battle system and its many nuances could be better explained in game. Overall, then, Stoic has served up another competent strategy experience, but it doesn't appear to be stretching itself.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, Mac
PUBLISHER: Versus Evil
DEVELOPER: Stoic
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC.: Windows XP SP3, 2GB RAM, 4GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE BANNER SAGA



WORSE THAN: FIRE EMBLEM FATES

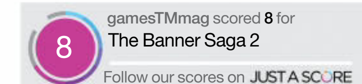
SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ADVANCED WARS: *The Banner Saga* is unique in the way it blends absorbing story-led gameplay in the style of Apple II classic *Oregon Trail* with Telltale-style decisions and *Fire Emblem*-like grid combat.

VERDICT

BUILDS ON AN ALREADY BRILLIANT INDIE HIT



THE BEST LAID PLANS OF ORKS AND MEN

Battlefleet Gothic: Armada

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: CyberConnect2
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (online)
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit operating system, 3.3 GHz quad core CPU, 1GB DirectX11 GPU, 4GB RAM, 10GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

AS GOOD AS

BLOOD BOWL 2



WORSE THAN

WARHAMMER: DAWN OF WAR II

***Battlefleet Gothic: Armada* very much rides along on the concept of its board game equivalent as much as it can.** It brings the systems and the rules into a real-time tactics environment, and a great job has been done porting it all over. It's an RTS for those who prefer controlling more important, less discardable units – think more *Total War* or *Company Of Heroes* rather than *StarCraft*.

The Warhammer setting and ruleset creates a game that – if you're a 40K fan – you probably ought to be playing already. The customisable ships should be given a particular mention since it gives you much more flexible fleet management, one that is especially integral to your success on missions. But it's the core gameplay that really rewards. Though the real-time gameplay can be slowed to a crawl for those struggling to keep on top of the numerous moving parts of any given battle, there's a special satisfaction to managing to not only overcome the varied and challenging assaults you'll encounter but to succeed in the face of them. It might not have the same pace as a match of *StarCraft*, but *Battlefleet Gothic: Armada* certainly evokes the same mental acuity needed to achieve victory.

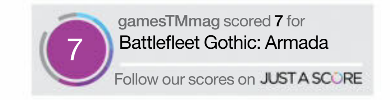
There's a glorious – and surprisingly refreshing – RTS here for those looking for something different. It doesn't especially offer anything not yet seen before, but the Warhammer setting and glorious Unreal Engine 4 visuals definitely help distinguish the game from its peers. Its balancing could do with some work, admittedly, and if you're not already a Warhammer 40K fan you may have a much steeper learning curve to overcome, but it's certainly a title well worth considering if 'Pirate Orks' is a phrase that means something to you.



Above: The models of your battleships maintain the Warhammer aesthetic perfectly. Better still is that you can customise your fleet to your preferences, and while visuals rarely improve an experience it's enough to get Warhammer geeks going.



A GREAT USE OF THE WARHAMMER LICENCE



TRY, TRY AGAIN

Rugby Challenge 3

Poor old rugby union. Following the travesties that are *Rugby World Cup 2015* and *Rugby 15* – two of the worst games on current-gen, never mind of the rugger genre – the sport has been crying out for a decent simulator to emerge from the virtual locker room. Is *Rugby Challenge 3* that glorious, sweat-drenched saviour? No, sadly, but it is the best rugby title out there.

Okay, that's not technically true. Last year's impressive *Rugby League Live 3* is the true rugby king but that's a different code so we'll just call *RC3* the best *union* offering. In the gameplay department, *RC3* offers a decent simulation, albeit one prone to the occasional glitch that sees players warp across the pitch. Passing is a tad slow, but the AI presents a surprising level of efficiency, driving you off the line when close to scoring or stringing offloads to throw off your defensive efforts.

RC3 also offers a competent mixture of modes for the rugby enthusiast – Tournaments (featuring most of the licensed leagues in the world including the Aviva Premiership and more) and a robust (if unoriginal) Be A Pro mode. It's also the first game in the series to feature Rugby Sevens, adding in a faster game more akin to league than traditional union.

Sadly, *RC3* suffers from the problem every rugby game has suffered since the EA era – a lack of polish. After two generations of sleek sims in the realm of basketball, football and gridiron, it's genuinely difficult to play something made on such a tight budget. You'll wince at the stock music that plays every time you go through the menus; you'll cringe at the repetitive commentary that sounds like it was recorded in an air raid shelter; you'll sigh at the fact most of the squads are from the 2014-2015 season in a 2016 game. However, should you be able to see past all that fug you'll find a rugby sim that's making the best of what it's got. Even the netcode is pretty solid (although expect a bit of ping as most players are south of the Equator). The wait for rugby union's *NBA 2K* continues.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Tru Blue Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Wicked Witch Software
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

RUGBY 15



WORSE THAN

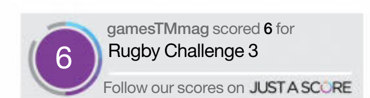


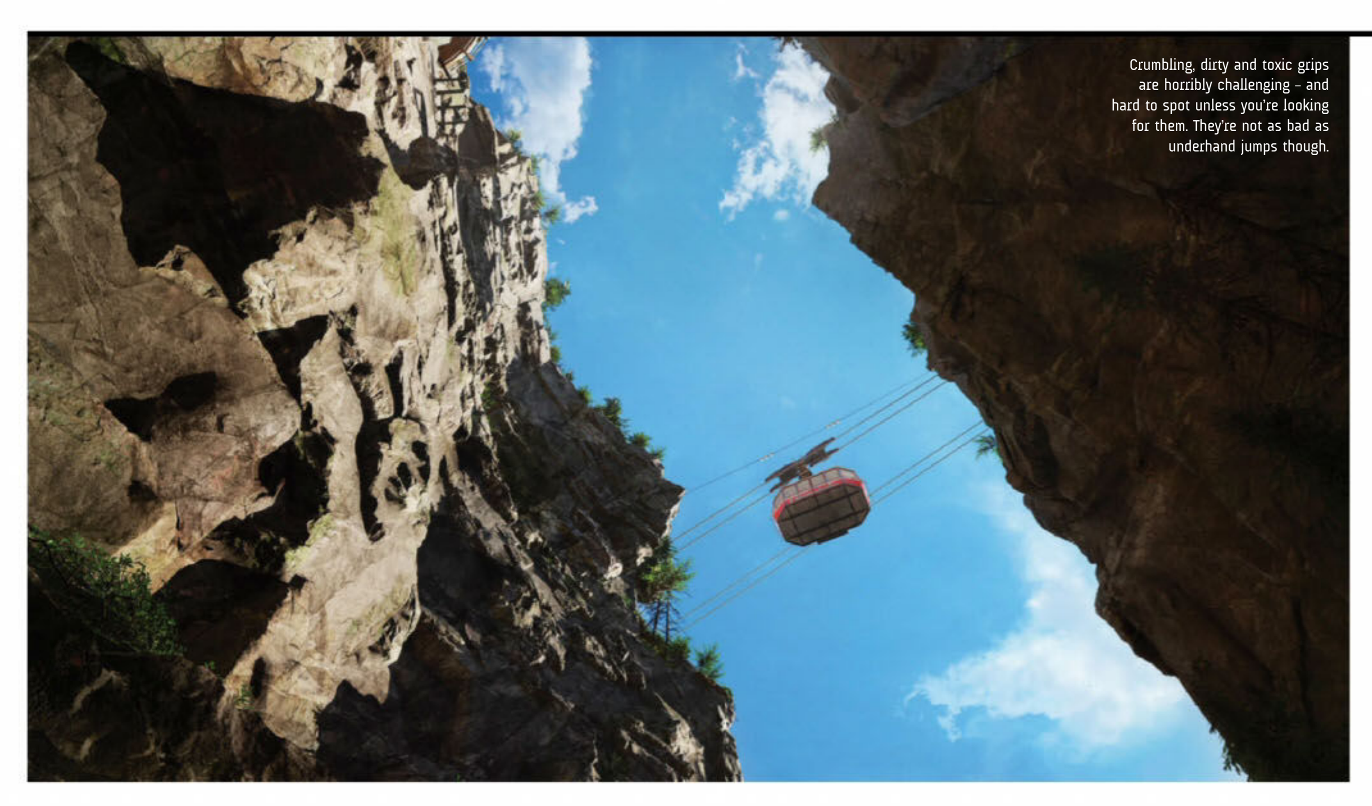
RUGBY LEAGUE LIVE 3

Expect all the licensed players, kits, teams and leagues, but don't expect those character models to resemble their real life counterparts. There's an odd mix of stadia, too – venues such as Kingsholm are instead traded for some bland, fake ones.

VERDICT

LACKS POLISH, BUT WORTH A TRY





Crumbling, dirty and toxic grips are horribly challenging – and hard to spot unless you're looking for them. They're not as bad as underhand jumps though.

GET TO GRIPS WITH VR

The Climb

Partway through a gruelling ascent of a canyon face in Crytek's *The Climb*, we couldn't take it any more. We were sweating and emotionally-exhausted, both in the game and out, halfway across an underhang where every slip meant a plummet to certain death – and we were slipping plenty. We died again, and alt-tabbed out to have a break. And the game crashed. Could we face restarting it?

We could and did. Because *The Climb* is odd for one of these first-gen VR games, in that it's both complete and compelling. You're an anonymous climber attempting to scale insane rock features with just your bare hands and a bit of chalk. Though there are fixed anchor points in the rock, you're not roped to them – this is insane free-climbing. To control your avatar, you have two hands floating in front of you, each controlled by a trigger, each with its own stamina meter. You look where you want to climb and grip a gamepad trigger to grip a hold. The shoulder buttons put chalk on the relevant hand, which improves your grip (aka, buffs your stamina). And the A button jumps whichever direction you're facing.

That's all there is to it. Five buttons and your head movement. It's a tough resource management game, where you attempt to reach a new handhold before the supporting hand runs out of stamina and gives way. Complexity comes from the true 3D rockfaces, where you have to physically lean and bend to get to low, high and corner grips, the ridiculous routes, and a variety of difficult grips.

Oh, and it's gorgeous. It's probably the best-looking Rift game around, with each of the three routes stunning you off the mountain – dragonflies buzz nearby, helicopters whirr further away, and a just-believable landscape spreads all around. Reaching the summit of a climb and just looking around from your *Assassin's Creed* perch is a huge reward.

There are still big problems with the game. It doesn't make sense sitting down – it has to be played standing up. Crucially your hands don't always grip when they're in the right place and we died more from that than anything else. And, as our climbing friends point out, the fact you're only using your hands to climb and not your feet is unrealistic if not quite immersion-breaking. It's also only got three real climbs – Alps, Canyon, – which are beautiful, but stingy for the asking price.

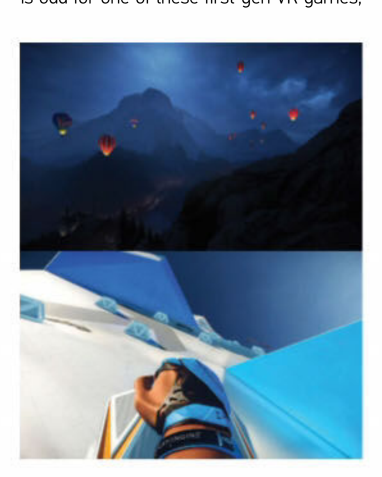
Finally, a caveat: if you get VR sickness, *The Climb* is rated 'intense' on the Oculus store, like *Eve: Valkyrie*. If you're a little afraid of heights, this could be an excellent way to get over it. *The Climb* isn't a killer app for Oculus – that game's still to come – and it's expensive, but it's the best extant example of what you can do with this unique hardware. It's terrifying, enervating, challenging – and wonderfully moreish. If you've got a Rift and space to stand, get climbing.



FORMAT: PC/Oculus Rift
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Crytek
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $49.99
RELEASE: Out now
MINIMUM SPEC: Oculus Rift, Nvidia GTX 970 / AMD 290, 8GB Ram, Windows 7, 2 x USB 3 ports, HDMI 1.3 video output.
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

FALLING GHOSTS: There isn't a multiplayer mode in *The Climb*, sadly, but there are online leaderboards and ghosts of the best climbers to test yourself against.



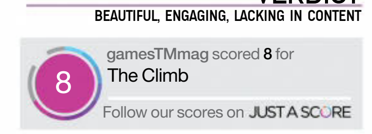
BETTER THAN

KINECT SPORTS RIVALS


WORSE THAN

CRYSIS

VERDICT
BEAUTIFUL, ENGAGING, LACKING IN CONTENT





WHY I ♥...

DEVIL MAY CRY 3: DANTE'S AWAKENING

ERIK ODELDAHL, DESIGN DIRECTOR, DICE

"*I'm not going to say* **Dark Souls**, *even though I want to, so I'm going to say that I love* **Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening**. *I've played that game on the PlayStation 2, I've played it on PC, and I've played it on Xbox 360. I just love, love, love to play it. It's because of the control system, and the way you can go in and out of animations and switch weapons mid-animation, I just love it so much. To me, it has the perfect combat system.*"



"I just love it so much. For me, it has the perfect combat system"

ERIK ODELDAHL, DESIGN DIRECTOR, DICE

RETRO

NO.175

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… GRADIUS

Join games™ as we celebrate one of Konami's longest-running franchises. Prepare to shoot the core and revisit a host of rock-hard shooters

KONAMI, LIKE MANY other developers with its roots in the arcades, is no stranger to shoot-em-ups. It jumped on the *Space Invaders* wagon in 1978 with *Space King* and continued to dabble in the genre for years to come. *Gradius* is by far its most successful shooting series and has given us such catchphrases as "Shoot the core" as well as several spin-off franchises. We can't discuss *Gradius* however without briefly mentioning Konami's rather excellent 1981 shooter *Scramble*. Originally seen as a standalone series, the release of *Gradius Generations* and *Gradius V* retrofitted the game to be the first title in the *Gradius* series. This makes sense as Konami's developers once revealed that *Gradius* had the working title of *Scramble 2* during development. Sadly, the connection wasn't to last.

Five years later, Konami released an official book, *Gradius Portable Official Guide*, which once again shunted *Scramble* out of the limelight and included it as part of Konami's 'Shooting History' series instead. It's unclear why Konami had this change of heart, but what is clear is that *Gradius* remains one of its most enduring franchises, even if the last physical standalone game was all the way back in 2004. Because the series is relatively small, we've taken the liberty of including its three spin-offs: *Salamander*, *Parodius* and the more recent *Otomedius* series, too. Enjoy.





GRADIUS 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

While its influence isn't as far-reaching as many think (few games outside Konami's own adopted its novel power-up feature) it certainly made a huge impact on its later games and spin-offs. Downed enemies drop icons that will either destroy all enemies onscreen or light-up a power bar. Once the desired weapon is highlighted it can be activated, making your ship, the Vic Viper, that little more powerful. It's an elegant system that also adds a surprising layer of strategy to proceedings. Its arcade success led to numerous ports, too. Notable examples are a new level for the MSX game and the legendary Konami Code found in the NES version. Oh, and the term "Shoot the core!" comes from the announcement at the beginning of every boss fight.



NEMESIS 2 1987

MSX

The big change to the standard *Gradius* formulae is your ship's ability to add additional weapons to its core arsenal. This is done by destroying a boss and flying into its core (you'll earn two weapons if you defeat it in 15 seconds or one within 16-30 seconds). It also adds secret stages, a dazzling array of new weapons and power-ups, a brand new ship called the Metalion and a cool new feature where you have to play back through the earlier stages in reverse order to reach stage 0.





SALAMANDER 1986

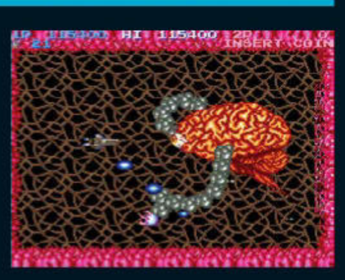
ARCADE, VARIOUS

It's a spin-off, sure, but that doesn't mean this ace shooter isn't worth covering. The biggest change is two-player co-operative gameplay, which introduces the new ship Lord British. And while we're on the subject of huge changes, lets mention the fact that *Salamander* features stages which scroll horizontally as well as vertically, something which was quite a big deal and rarely seen at the time. Unlike with *Gradius*, power-ups are immediately gained by picking up capsules, and you now immediately continue upon dying (*Gradius* would send you back to a predefined checkpoint) which makes things that little bit easier. There are new weapons, including the excellent Ripple Laser (which would cross over into later *Gradius* games) and it's set in the same universe as *Gradius* (the year 6709).

LIFE FORCE 1987

ARCADE, VARIOUS

This is kind of just *Salamander*, but there are a number of slight gameplay differences that means it plays very differently. Actually, that's a lie, there's just one big gameplay difference and that is that it uses exactly the same power-up system found in the original *Gradius*. The game has also had its visuals altered and adds new sound so that you're now flying through someone's body instead of deep space. Confusingly, the US release of *Life Force* (shown here) does use the same power-up system found in the original *Salamander*.







GRADIUS II: GOFER NO YABOU 1988

ARCADE, PC ENGINE CD, SHARP X68000

Remember when we mentioned how the Ripple Laser would feature in later *Gradius* games? Well this is where it started. Other *Salamander* weapons made it across too – in fact, there are now four different weapon configurations and progressions to choose from. You can also now select between the traditional front shield of *Gradius* and the Force Field found in *Salamander*. These extra configurations are useful as *Gradius II* is incredibly frustrating when it comes to difficulty, with tricky enemy waves and some brutally tough bosses to defeat. If it wasn't tough enough already, it also adds the Boss Rush and a new Speed Stage where the game scrolls faster than usual and forces the Vic Viper to squeeze through increasingly narrower corridors. Grrrrr.





PARODIUS 1988

MSX

Konami's playful parody of *Gradius* started off life on the MSX (a Japanese computer Konami were staunch defenders of). While it predominantly takes cheerful sideswipes at *Gradius*, the *Parodius* games aren't afraid to make fun of other classic Konami games too, including *Antarctic Adventure*, *Castlevania*, *Twinbee* and many others. Also known as *Parodius: The Octopus Saves The Earth*, this Japanese exclusive is extremely similar to *Gradius* from a gameplay point of view, so it features the same power-up system. The key difference however is the introduction of a new roulette mechanic that requires the player to press a button to stop it and can give a negative effect. Like *Gradius II* it also features different selectable power-up progressions, but they are now tied to specific characters, including the penguin found in Hideo Kojima's *Antarctic Adventure*, an Octopus, a cute version of the Vic Viper and several other characters. It's far livelier than earlier *Gradius* games too, with a focus on bright colours and cute penguins.

NEMESIS 3: THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION 1989

MSX

Piling on the name confusion surrounding the *Gradius* series, this is known as *Nemesis 3: The Eve Of Destruction* in Europe and *Salamander II* in Korea. It's actually a spin-off of *Gradius II* and has an extremely complicated plot that would be literally impossible to recount with the space that we have. We will however, mention that it retains many of the weapons first featured in Nemesis 2 and adds several new ones. This time though, instead of quickly defeating bosses to earn them, you have to find where they've been hidden in the stage instead. Oh and it's probably one of the hardest games in the series.





"GRADIUS III IS ALSO INFAMOUS FOR A RATHER RUBBISH PSEUDO 3D LEVEL, FOUND ON STAGE FOUR"

GRADIUS III 1989

ARCADE, SNES

The insane difficulty of *Gradius III* makes earlier games seem like a pleasant stroll through Disney Land. In fact, the Japanese version actually features a 'Beginner Mode' that features the first three levels of the game. If the high difficulty wasn't a big enough issue, *Gradius III* is also infamous for a rather rubbish pseudo 3D level, found on stage four, which is devoid of enemies and simply has you flying into the screen and grabbing as many power-ups as possible. Thankfully, this naff stage was removed from the SNES conversion, which was the only port at the time.

While it is rather difficult, some of the stress of playing *Gradius III* can be offset by using its rather clever 'Edit Mode'. In addition to using the typical pre-defined weapons, it's also possible to interchange several weapons into new configurations. The game was re-released in 2000 alongside *Gradius IV* on PS2 and features an additional Extra Edit mode.





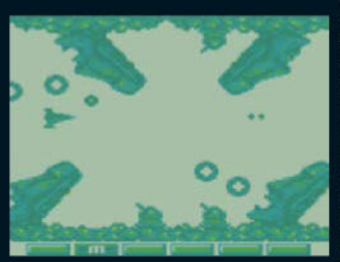
PARODIUS DA! 1990

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Due to the obscurity of the MSX, many believe this to be the first game in the *Parodius* series. It actually has fewer characters than the original *Parodius*, simply including, Tako the Octopus, Pentarou the penguin, Twinbee and Vic Viper. The key difference though, is that each character has a unique configuration based on a particular game, so Tako is based on *Salamander*, Pentarou on *Gradius II*, Twinbee uses *Twinbee* and Vic Viper has a traditional *Gradius* configuration.

The other main difference is the introduction of bells, which act as one-use power-ups. Depending on their colour, they can take the form of smart bombs, allow your character to grow in size, or even add a megaphone that spouts various phrases that can kill incoming enemies. It features far better visuals than in the MSX game and the wacky adaptations of classic tunes sound even better. It also features numerous scantily clad ladies that typically act as bosses or barriers (one early stage sees you flying between the legs of a can can dancer). There were numerous ports, many of which were of a very high standard.





NEMESIS 1990

GAME BOY

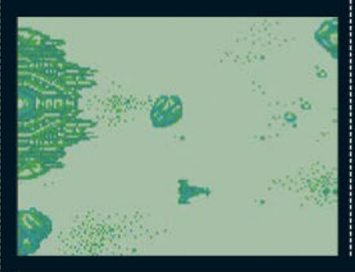
The Game Boy was an incredibly popular handheld so it should come as no surprise to learn that several *Gradius* games appeared on it. What is surprising though is just how good the first one is, easily being on par with the excellent Game Boy port of *R-Type*. While it features similar elements to the original *Gradius* game, all the actual levels are completely new and not found in previous games. The biggest bonus is that it's now possible to choose which level you start on and you can also change the number of lives you start with – amazingly, all the way up to 99. *Nemesis* is rather refreshing in that it also introduces a large number of new bosses, many of which are surprisingly well detailed and look pleasingly intimidating on the Game Boy's tiny screen. A solid shooter that was eventually rereleased as part of Konami's first *Konami Game Boy Collection*.

GRADIUS: THE INTERSTELLAR ASSAULT 1991

GAME BOY

Here's yet another game that goes by multiple names. It's known as *Nemesis II: Return Of The Hero* in Japan and Europe and *Gradius: The Interstellar Assault* in the US. Despite its name, it shares very few of the staples that are found in many other *Gradius* games. It features none of the classic *Gradius* music, many of the classic stages aren't included and there are no Moai enemies either. There are similarities, of course, including the evergreen Vic Viper and the traditional power-up bar and core bosses, but it feels quite divorced from the main series at times.

Despite this estrangement, it's another solid addition and another cracking Game Boy shooter. It starts off with an excellent stage that has you being chased by a gigantic boss and doesn't really let up from there. The graphics are significantly enhanced over the original Game Boy game, while the music also sounds far punchier than before. Like *Nemesis* before it, it was later ported to another *Konami Game Boy Collection*.





JIKKYO OSHABERI PARODIUS 1995

SNES, PLAYSTATION, SATURN

Although the two previous *Parodius* games started off life in arcades, *Jikkyo Oshaberi Parodius* began on Nintendo's 16-bit Super Famicom, as a Japanese exclusive. Its name translates as *Chatting Parodius Live*, a title that becomes more obvious as you hear the huge amounts of Japanese voice samples that punctuate the game.

While previous *Parodius* games took subtle swipes at earlier Konami games, it's more obvious here, with levels based on *Twinbee*, *XEXEX* and *Lethal Enforcers*. It also features a huge number of playable characters, while hidden fairies unlock crazy cheats. It was updated for the Saturn and PlayStation in 1996 as *Parodius Forever With Me*.



MORE TO LOOK OUT FOR

- NEMESIS 90 KAI 1993, SHARP X68000
- GOKUJO PARODIUS! 1994, VARIOUS
- PARO WARS 1997, PLAYSTATION
- GRADIUS 4 1998, ARCADE, PS2
- GRADIUS NEO 2004, MOBILE
- GRADIUS NEO IMPERIAL 2004, MOBILE
- OTOMEDIUS 2007, ARCADE
- GRADIUS ARC 2009, MOBILE





SALAMANDER 2 1996

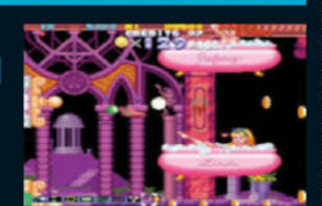
ARCADE, SATURN, PLAYSTATION

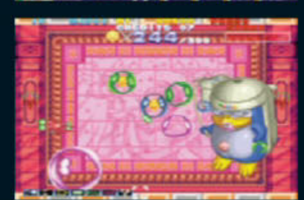
Salamander's true sequel is an aesthetic delight thanks to Konami mixing prerendered CGI and beautiful 2D sprites together. It has a truly stunning soundtrack, too, building on the brilliant tunes found in the original game. In terms of gameplay enhancements, only a few new ones are added, but they're fairly decent all the same. Several new weapons appear, including a Twin Laser, and weapons can now be upgraded. It's also possible to sacrifice an option to create a significantly powerful attack (the option then shrinks in size and circles your ship if picked up). There are only two overhead stages this time around, and the difficulty level is a little high, but it remains an excellent little blaster all the same.

SEXY PARODIUS 1996

ARCADE, SATURN, PLAYSTATION

Many deem this to be the best *Parodius* game and it's hard to argue otherwise. It takes the silly wackiness to a whole new level, has sensational looking visuals and some brilliantly catchy tunes. It's the new mission based gameplay that really elevates *Sexy Parodious*, however. Collect a set number of coins and destroy a certain amount of enemies and you'll complete the stage as normal, fail and you'll have an all new stage to complete.







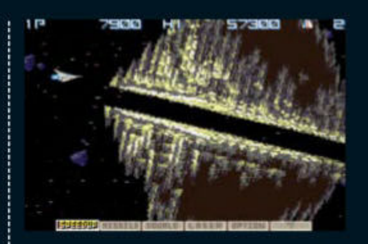
GRADIUS GAIDEN 1997

PLAYSTATION

Gradius Gaiden remains one of the best games in the series, only being beaten by Treasure's later effort. Everything about it, from its delightful soundtrack to its stunning visuals is superb, and an incredible amount of effort has gone into its level design.

The second stage consists of an old graveyard, full of bosses from previous games in the series, while another stage takes place in a crystal cavern that reflects your ship's lasers. The bosses are equally imaginative and are often huge in scope, making *Gaiden* a true tour de force.

While its weapon selection isn't quite as strong as previous games, it's far better balanced and introduces a simultaneous two-player mode that makes survival far easier when compared to other *Gradius* games. Although it started off life confined to Japan on its original release, it was eventually released as part of the PSP's *Gradius Collection*.



GRADIUS GENERATIONS 2001

GBA

Known as *Gradius Galaxies* in America and *Gradius Advance* in Europe, this is the only game in the series to be released on the GBA. It's a classic *Gradius* game, with all the key tropes from the series as well as some exceptionally well detailed sprite design and great looking bosses. There are four different types of weapon configurations to choose from – one of which is based on *Salamander* – and it's possible to have the computer select power-ups for you. While the brutally tough challenge mode is only found in the Japanese release, all three versions let you resume the game from any completed stages.



UP, UP, DOWN, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT, B, A

The many uses of the Konami code



GRADIUS

VERSION NES

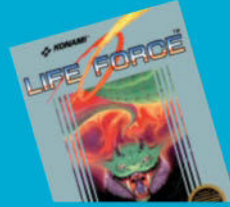
In this game, this powerful cheat activates all power-ups in the game with the exception of Speed-Up, Double and Laser.



GRADIUS

SYSTEM: PC ENGINE

If you're finding the PC Engine port too tough enter the code to receive full options, the shield and Missiles.



LIFE FORCE

VERSION: NES

Enter the infamous code on the title screen and you'll be rewarded with 30 lives. It doesn't work on all versions of the game though.



GRADIUS II

VERSION: PC ENGINE

If you pause the game and enter the code you'll receive full power. You can use it multiple times when playing on easy mode.



GRADIUS III

SYSTEM: SNES

This is a sneaky one. You receive all power-ups but instantly die upon pausing the game. Use the L and R triggers to get around this problem.





GRADIUS V 2004

PS2

This is not only the best *Gradius* game in the series, but quite possibly one of the best horizontal shooters to have ever been released. Created by the talented team at Treasure it's a truly wonderful game that takes the odd idea from *Salamander* (your options now disperse when you die, allowing you to re-catch them) but also adds many of its own. By far the most innovative is the excellent new control you have over multiples (options): in previous games they trailed behind you, roughly following your movement, but now you have direct control over them, with different configurations available depending on which initial setup you choose. As with *Gradius Gaiden*, *Gradius V* once again features simultaneous co-operative play, handy, as it once again presents a stiff challenge.



GRADIUS REBIRTH 2008

WII

M2 is best known for its emulation work, but it's also made a small number of original games. Some of its most popular are its three *ReBirth* titles commissioned by Konami which focused on *Castlevania*, *Gradius* and *Contra*. Needless to say, we're focusing on the *Gradius* update here.

In many ways *ReBirth* can be best described as a remix of the earlier *Gradius* games and as a result it feels delightful old school. In fact it uses the early MSX games as a point of reference, while much of the music is remixed from other *Gradius* games. Sadly, it dispenses with the multiplayer action of *Gaiden* and *Gradius V* and once again ups the difficulty level. Thankfully, this is offset somewhat by the standard game mode having unlimited continues. A second mode, Score Attack gives you a single credit but allows for online leaderboards.

Aesthetically resembling *Gradius Gaiden*, *ReBirth* is a solid shooter and the last true *Gradius* game. Here's hoping we don't have to wait too long for a new one.

OTOMEDIUS GORGEOUS 2008

XBOX 360



The original *Otomedius* was released in 2007 and was Konami's first arcade shooter in eight years. Effectively a spin-off of *Gradius* it features a touch-screen interface and also worked with an e-AMUSEMENT Pass. The Xbox 360 port was released a year later and was released alongside a special Hori controller that replicated the original arcade controls. It also featured additional characters along with a new VS Mission and Gorgeous Mode. By versions allow for simultaneous three-player action.

OTOMEDIUS EXCELLENT 2011

XBOX 360



Unlike its predecessor, *Otomedius Excellent* was never released in arcades. It's more of the same if we're honest, although the visuals have been greatly improved and there are plenty of new characters and stages in the form of downloadable content. Interestingly, Koji Igarashi, who is best known for his contributions to *Castlevania*, was the game's producer.

NEMESIS

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

This one's handy, and has no negatives. Pause the game, enter the code, and you'll have access to a full set of options, lasers and a force shield.



GRADIUS DELUXE PACK

SYSTEM: SATURN

If you buy this Saturn compilation and use the code you'll get access to all weapons. It only works on Saturn Easy and Saturn Hard though.



GRADIUS IV FUKKATSU

SYSTEM: PS2

A nice one for the PS2 port. Simply pause the game, enter the code and you'll receive all power-ups with the exception of Speed Up and Double.



PARODIUS

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

If you enter the code when the Konami logo appears you'll get a sound test. Use it in-game to receive all power-ups except Speed Up and Double.



GRADIUS GALAXIES

SYSTEM: GBA

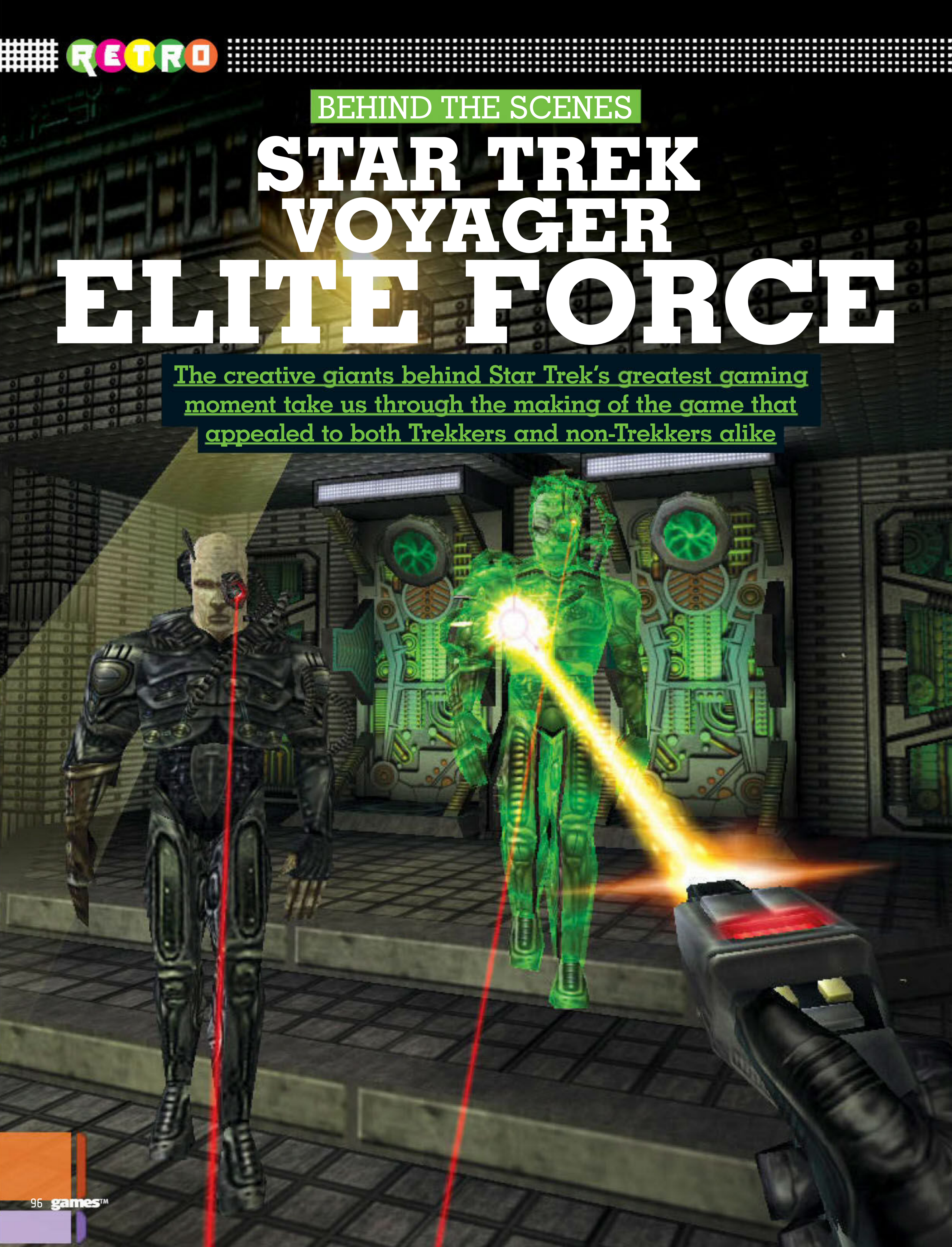
You have to substitute the L and R triggers or you'll instantly die upon unpausing the game. Do it right to receive full power-ups.



GRADIUS V

SYSTEM: PS2

The normal code but substitute B and A for L1 and R1. You'll receive full power-ups. Use L2 and RR2 to receive the Double Shot instead.



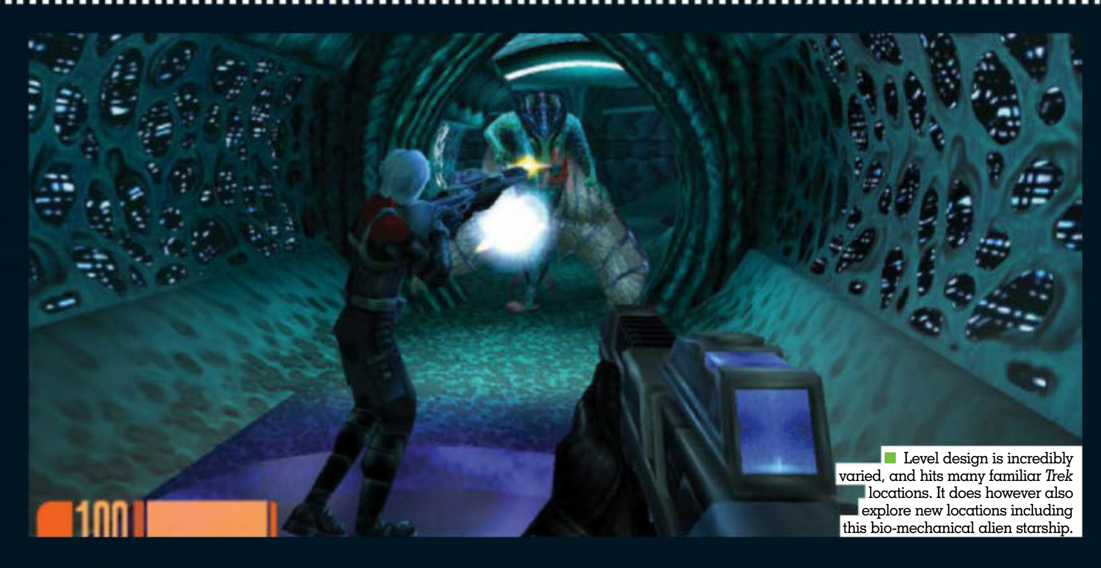
BEHIND THE SCENES

STAR TREK VOYAGER ELITE FORCE

The creative giants behind Star Trek's greatest gaming moment take us through the making of the game that appealed to both Trekkers and non-Trekkers alike



Brian Pelletier was project lead on *Elite Force* and would go on to work on the *X-Men Legends* games.



Level design is incredibly varied, and hits many familiar *Trek* locations. It does however also explore new locations including this bio-mechanical alien starship.

Released: 2000
Format: PC, PS2
Publisher: Activision
Key Staff: Brian Pelletier (Project Lead), Les Dorscheid (Art Lead), Christopher Foster (Design Lead), Steve and Pelletier Raffel (Creative Directors)

IN PREPARATION FOR his next game Brian Pelletier went to Paramount and sought out legendary *Star Trek* illustrator Rick Sternbach. After all, with his next project being a *Star Trek* game that placed the player on the USS Voyager, he desperately needed blueprints of the famed starship as a point of reference. Early into a *Star Trek* TV series' run, it was commonplace for in-depth blueprints to be published of whatever starship the series was set on. This not only let hardcore fans of the franchise invest more time into the world they loved, but it also helped the teams behind *Star Trek* to form a realistic map of the setting of their respective series. However, when Pelletier needed to learn about the inner workings of the USS Voyager for *Elite Force*, a game on which he was the project lead, the blueprints simply didn't exist. Despite this problem on top of other eventual issues with the *Quake III: Arena* engine, *Elite Force* was a huge success, and ultimately pleased both Trekkers and non-Trekkers alike.

The story begins in the spring of 1998. With Activision just fresh off acquiring the rights to create *Star Trek* games from Viacom, the plan was to initially create three games. Activision would eventually go on to publish such *Star Trek* titles as *Bridge Commander*, *Away Team* and *Armada*. However, the first of these games would be a first-person shooter, and Activision approached Raven Software to take command of the project. *Star Trek* has a lengthy history in videogames, and not all of these efforts were fitting in terms of quality for such a respected franchise. In learning from these past mistakes in *Star Trek* gaming history, Pelletier says, "*Star Trek* is a vast and rich franchise of settings and characters in which to explore ideas. We asked ourselves, what is it like to walk around the ship and talk to all the characters. *Trek* is more cerebral than action, with many characters and rich dialogue between them. We felt we needed that in our game as part of the holistic experience of living in the *Trek* universe. I think other *Trek* games made mistakes by focusing on just one or two aspects of what *Trek* is about. I feel they also failed in capturing the soul or essence of *Trek* by focusing on the type of 'game' it was, then wrapped *Trek* around it. We didn't think about making a shooter. Our team concentrated on what *Trek* was about, and how we could take an action shooter fit within it."

THE PARAMOUNT LICENSING GROUP WAS VERY OPEN TO OUR IDEAS AS LONG AS THEY MADE SENSE IN THE TREK UNIVERSE

With a strong mantra in mind for *Elite Force*, the team initially got to work on the game which set itself around the events of *The Next Generation*, and focused on an unknown crew on a Defiant-class starship. However, the rug was soon pulled from the project mere months into development as Paramount, not happy with *Voyager*'s ratings during its fourth season, pushed for the game to tie directly into the show, ultimately with the hopes of boosting ratings. After re-jigging what was already in the making to fit *Voyager*, the development of *Elite Force* was in full swing.

Taking place between episodes 21 and 22 of season six of *Voyager* (which can be found out by taking note of a Stardate given by Captain Janeway), *Elite Force* focused on the Hazard Team; a specialised unit of tactical officers that served as Voyager's first line of defence. Taking



Between missions you can interact with other members of the Hazard Team, and this helps build a great sense of camaraderie with the team.

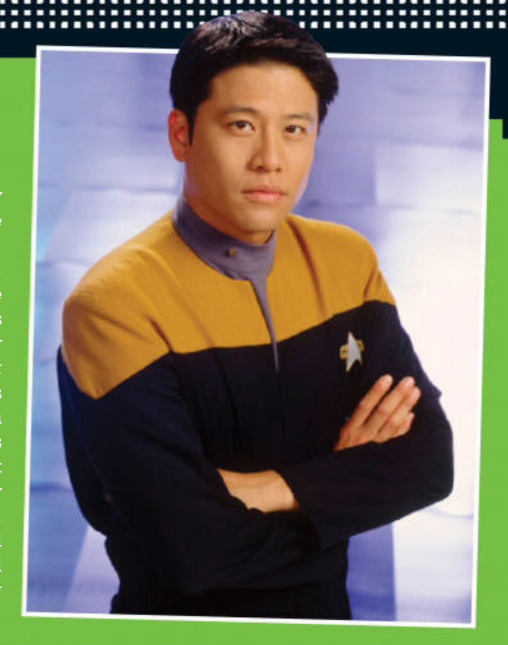
THE CREW SPEAK!

Two Star Trek stars' take on their virtual Voyager adventure

■ THOUGH FOR THE most part *Elite Force* focused on the Hazard Team, voiced wonderfully by Rino Romano, Devon Raymond, Iris Bahr, Derek McGrath, Michael McFall and Thomas F. Wilson, the cast also featured more familiar characters. Adding to the authenticity of the game, *Elite Force* featured the vocals talents of the cast of the *Voyager* TV series.

In regards to his work on *Elite Force*, Tim Russ, who is best known for his role as Tuvok says, "Working on *Elite Force* was fairly straight forward. I was of course playing a role I had played for seven years, unlike other videogames wherein I have to play several different characters. The sessions ran about four hours each, and there was a ton of dialogue, because the Tuvok character had to have a variety of responses for the player depending on which decision or action the player made. It turned out to be a very complex, and a well structured game, and I have gotten nothing but positive feedback about it."

Tim wasn't alone in praising the game, as Garrett Wang also enjoyed his time while working on the game as he reprised his role as Ensign Harry Kim. Garrett recalls, "I remember going in to record the voiceover for *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force* as if it were yesterday. It was the first videogame voiceover I had ever been part of. What stood out most from the many lines I had to record were the lines that were meant to be Harry Kim's response to being shot at by the player. It was comical, recording lines like, "Ouch!" and "Hey! I'm on your side!" I've had many fans tell me that the game has withstood the test of time and that they still enjoy playing *Elite Force* to this day."



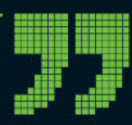



Star Trek: Voyager Elite Force Review

Star Trek fans shouldn't be alone in experiencing the game's exciting story-driven single-player campaign, as well as its solid multiplayer mode.

It's undoubtedly one of the best Star Trek games to date, and its only rival in its genre so far this year is, unsurprisingly, Raven's own shooter, Soldier of Fortune

GameSpot, 2000



the role of Ensign Alex Munro (who can be male or female) the player is tasked with defending Voyager, after it's suddenly transported to a mysterious starship graveyard. Surrounded by a sea of derelict starships and a whole host of *Star Trek* enemies that want the crew dead, it's up to Munro and the Hazard Team to save the day. The set-up was classic *Star Trek*, and the locations, script, items, weapons and overall feel of the game followed suit accordingly.

Although – back when *Elite Force* was in development – *Star Trek* was starting to lose its importance on our screens, Paramount was still incredibly protective of its intellectual property. That said, as Les Dorscheid, art lead on the game, says, "Paramount was wonderful to work with. We were very excited to be trusted with the license, and the people I worked with from Paramount were enthusiastic gaming fans. All the visuals needed to be approved, but for the most part they liked what we created. We were supplied with great reference and research materials too. The basic direction was to stay within the *Voyager* universe for characters, weapons, and ship designs.

This sentiment is echoed by Pelletier. "The Paramount licensing group was very open to our ideas as long as they made sense in the *Trek* universe. I believe that because we approached our ideas from *Voyager* and *Trek* first, then worked them into the game. We stayed within the boundaries and used what the franchise offered instead of rewriting it to fit our game. We weren't trying to change things, but rather add things that made sense to the current situation.

"Take the Hazard Team for instance; we were making a shooter and thus needed to place emphasis on shooting. We came up with a team of crew members who would be trained as an Elite Force to deal with unknown threats. Voyager was separated from Starfleet in an unexplored quadrant of the galaxy making their way back home. It made sense that the Captain and first officers should be protected and not be put in harm's way by going on away missions. This made sense to Paramount too. We were able to place Klingons from *The Next Generation* and a classic *Trek* ship in the game because we made them fit into the storyline, and thus had a logical reason for them being there. Paramount again accepted the reasoning and allowed it."

As Raven Software had a long relationship with id Software and used every one of their engines since the days of *Castle Wolfenstein 3D*, *Elite Force* utilised the *Quake III: Arena* engine. Though the team revelled in its ability to create curved surfaces, something Pelletier and Dorscheid felt was a must in order to properly replicate the interiors of *Voyager*, using the engine didn't come without its issues. "If I had to pick two of the biggest issues while making *Elite Force*, one would be working with *Quake III* technology while it was still being developed by id Software," says Pelletier. "There were many occasions

DELAYS GETTING THE FINAL TECH MEANT WE HAD TO CRUNCH NEAR THE VERY END OF THE PROJECT TO CREATE ALL OF THE PUZZLES



■ One mission faces you off against a Terran Empire crew, more commonly known as the mirrorverse version of Starfleet.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Quake III: Arena > Voyager: Elite Force > Call Of Duty



Commonly known as the *Quake III* engine thanks to its use in this game, id Tech 3 became a popular base for the FPS titles in the future.



Following on from its use in *Elite Force*, Infinity Ward would use a modified *Quake III* engine to make the original *Call Of Duty* for PC. Humble beginnings for a massive franchise.



were we would get the latest tech update from John Carmack, and it would destroy weeks worth of work our level designers did, which continually put us behind schedule. I remember several times it was the lighting that had to be redone because of tech changes with curved surfaces."

The second issue Pelletier and his team faced was *Elite Force*'s game flow. He continues, "When working with undone technology you spend half the development time just getting the tech to point where you can actually build a game. We were planning a lot of puzzles which meant specific mechanics be in place. Delays getting the final tech meant we had to crunch near the very end of the project to create all of the puzzles and final game flow. Myself, Steve Raffle (creative director) and Chris Foster (design lead) spent two straight weeks in a conference room laying out the entire game flow making it cohesive. The game designers then went into massive crunch mode implementing all the puzzles and gameplay into the levels."

Though the team tussled with the engine throughout development, everything else in place ensured that *Elite Force* was a robust and fun shooter. Featuring an array of weapons, aliens and locales that were both familiar to fans and also original creations entirely, *Elite Force* successfully felt like it belonged in the *Star Trek* universe, something many games within the franchise failed to achieve at that point. This came down to many



The bridge of Voyager is perfectly recreated in *Elite Force* and fully explorable. The same goes for the adjoining briefing room and Captain's quarters.



Elite Force contains a few fun moments in which the player can go down the stealth route. They're short-lived though.

ONLINE PLAY PERFECTED

Elite Force's online multiplayer- the ultimate Trekker experience

THE MAIN CAMPAIGN of *Elite Force* was everything a Trekker could ever have wanted, but its online multiplayer placed all the weapons, items and characters within the confines of a singular level, all the while pitted against 31 enemies. The result, whether you were playing against real players or making use of *Elite Force*'s fantastic AI bots, was simply stunning to behold. From playing as the Klingon messianic figure Kahless and taking down your friends in Deathmatch, to choosing Boothby, the elderly Starfleet Academy grounds keeper, and evading the growing collective in Assimilation mode, multiplayer in *Elite Force* was addictive, hilarious at times and often proved a better time sink than the main campaign itself.

factors, one of which was Les' visual execution of the game. Though *Elite Force* is filled with interesting levels including that of a Borg Cube and a bio-mechanical starship, one level in particular placed the player on an enemy base comprised of various cobbled together starships. Throughout this unique level the player ventured through the remains of a mirror universe's Constitution class starship, a Klingon Bird-of-Prey, a Hirogen hunting vessel and a Malon freighter.

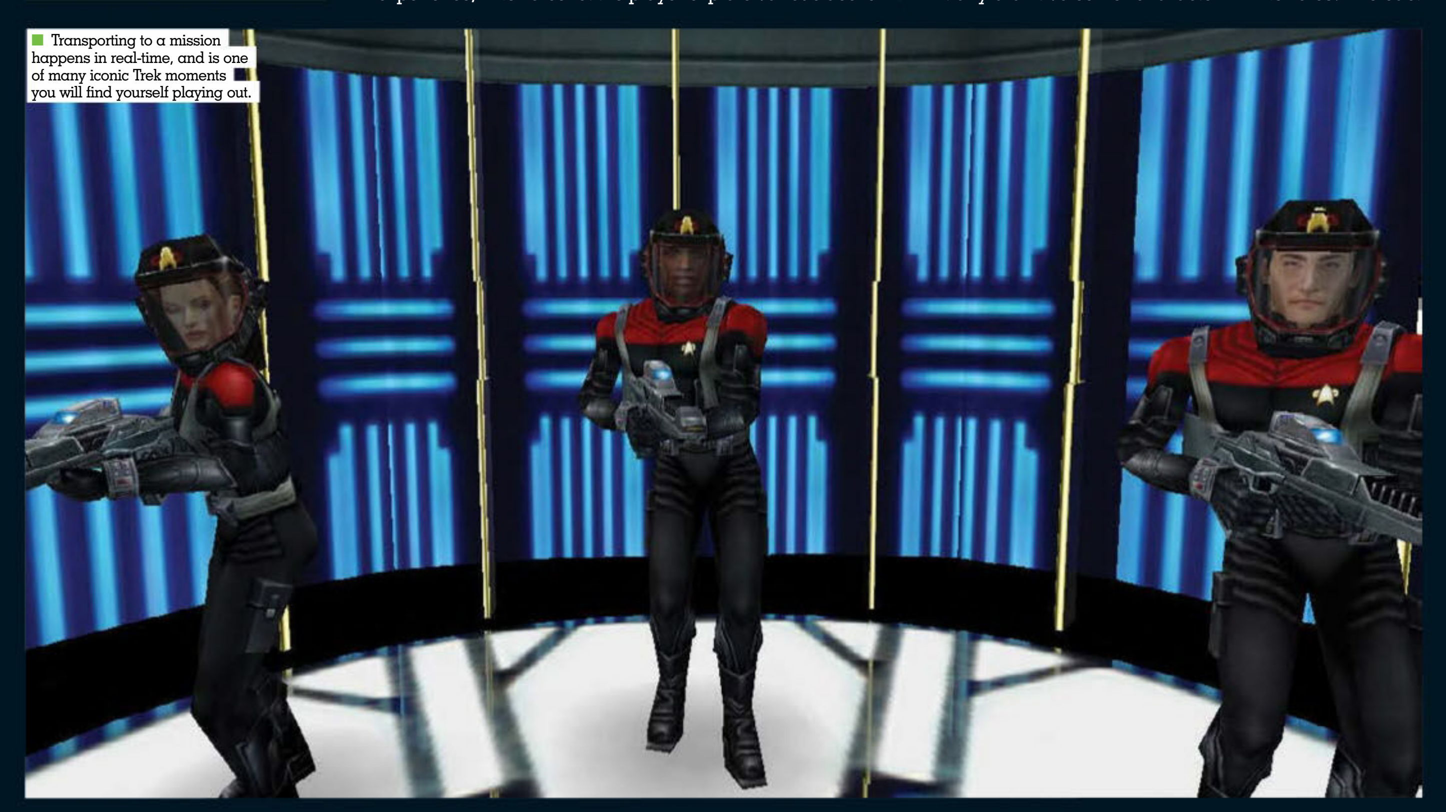
In creating this memorable level, Dorscheid recalls, "Most often, levels are designed with the gameplay in mind first, while the art needs to play a supporting role. That's how I recall the development of the Scavenger base. We placed proxy objects in the level first, then refined the gameplay, and once we knew the space and composition we created the final art assets. This mission had some advanced scripting compared with other games at the time, and the environments needed to allow the pathing to function without getting hung up, creating bugs and problems getting through QA testing."

The main modelling tool throughout the development of Elite Force was 3D Studio Max. Dorscheid remembers how innovative the development team were as he says, "3D Studio Max came with multiple reference books each two to three inches thick. We needed to learn new techniques and develop new procedures to create top quality environments, characters, FX, and weapons. The programmers created art tools in house, including a UV texture coordinate unwrap tool, and this was before similar tools were the industry standard.

Elite Force brought the player through a varied selection of alien locations, but the most important location was a little closer to home- the USS Voyager itself. Fitting in line with Pelletier's desire to create the ultimate *Star Trek* experience, *Elite Force* let the player explore various decks of the ship. Later added to with an expansion pack in 2001, *Elite Force* would ultimately let the player explore classic areas such as the holodeck (complete with Holographic Programs), the shuttle bay, the mess hall, engineering, the transporter room, sickbay and, naturally, the bridge. Though Pelletier didn't walk away from his meeting with Rick Sternbach with any blueprints of *Voyager*, he says, "We got the awesome consolation of working directly with a *Star Trek* visionary over the next few months to diagram the layouts for the decks of *Voyager*, in order to make players feel like they were in a logical *Trek* ship, Jefferies tubes and all."

Furthermore, in terms of tackling the recreation of the many halls and decks of *Voyager*, Dorscheid recalls, "We drew our own blueprints and schematics to work from, wanting to make all the decks fit together. They didn't fit together physically, but visually I believe we succeeded. We laboured over the details, but of course some of the scale needed to accommodate game mechanics. Doors had to be a bit larger, hallways wider, and ceilings higher. I remember testing multiple camera settings, going back and forth with the programmers to balance visual space with ease of camera movement. This had a big impact on how fast the player appeared to run. We wanted fast paced action, but needed room to run without compromising the visual accuracy. It was a lot to consider before we ever got to the fun stuff like recreating the weapons, ships, characters and set dressing.

Adding to the authenticity, Raven Software had full access to the cast of *Voyager*, all of whom returned to voice their respective characters. However, though her voice was later added to the game through the expansion pack, Jeri Ryan who played Seven of Nine initially didn't voice her character in *Elite Force*. The cast



Transporting to a mission happens in real-time, and is one of many iconic Trek moments you will find yourself playing out.


Les Dorscheid would later apply his artistic talents to games such as *Jedi Academy*, *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* and *Defiance*.





Weapons stick to the standard Quake formula, but visually they're bright, wild, and eye-popping enough to give you the satisfied you need, especially given that you aren't going to be blowing aliens into bloody bits like you would in your average fragfest.

IGN, 2000



Weapons in Elite Force pack a heavy punch, and with eight available throughout the game, there is always a perfect weapon for a certain situation.

were the final piece of the puzzle that made the game feel like a true Star Trek experience. Whether you found yourself in sickbay being examined by The Doctor with his terrible bedside manner, in the mess hall watching Nelix prepare a meal for the crew, or on the bridge surrounded by characters such as Janeway, Tuvok, Harry Kim or Chakotay, it all felt like an interactive episode of the TV series.

In terms of what the actors brought to the table, Pelletier says, "Having the entire cast in the game gave credibility to the product. We wanted to create an entire *Voyager* experience, and that meant including all the cast and their unique personalities to help with authenticity. We also wanted to explore each character and how they would react in the game to the situations that were happening. The actors were great to work with. They were all enthusiastic to be part of the project. Some even played early versions of the game to understand their role within it. During the recording sessions, they would help correct dialogue for their character if it didn't sound right. I really believe they enjoyed the whole process. We also got compliments from some of them for our writing."

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE BEING IN THE STAR TREK UNIVERSE, THEN PLAY THIS GAME

Though the team at Raven Software were certain that Trekkers would enjoy all the familiar trappings of the *Star Trek* universe on offer, the new cast of characters in the form of the Hazard Team were something untested and unproven. Approaching *Elite Force*, as Pelletier puts it, as a "day in the life of a Starfleet crewmember", the team did their best to create a selection of original characters, each one with a different personality and relationship to the main character of Munro.

To help build up a realistic bond between the player and their team, there were very few cut-scenes in the game. Instead, Raven Software opted to let the player take control of Munro between missions, and this was when most of the Hazard Team interactions would happen. These little moments in which the Hazard Team had downtime helped build up a sense of camaraderie, and proved to be a much praised element of the game by fans. It was that final element that helped *Elite Force* become one of the most respected, enjoyed and, above all else, authentic *Star Trek* games of all time.

Looking back at Elite Force, both Dorscheid and Pelletier are incredibly proud of what Raven Software brought to the *Star Trek* universe. "We poured our enthusiasm, creative energy and collective talents into it," Dorscheid says. "We had a great team and were given a great opportunity. It was fun and rewarding to work with so many talented artists, designers, animators, and programmers on a high profile project like *Star Trek*." Pelletier echoes this sentiment, and ultimately perfectly sums up what made *Elite Force* great in saying, "I'd like it to be remembered as one of the best *Star Trek* simulations every created. If you want to know what it feels like being in the *Star Trek* universe, then play this game."

For many Trekkers out there, *Elite Force* was the perfect *Star Trek* simulation. From the characters, locations, weapons, music and story, it was *Star Trek* through and through. However, beneath the visual and auditory flair that *Elite Force* had in spades, it also managed to tap into the heart of *Star Trek*, and that is something that is rather hard to pull off, which is evident from past games in the franchise. It walked the line between dealing with the dilemmas and moral issues that *Star Trek* often posed to the viewer, with the undeniable fact that it needed to be an action packed FPS. It achieved this near impossible feat with style and substance. *Elite Force* followed up with an enjoyable sequel by Ritual Entertainment in 2003, but it is the original that will ultimately live long and prosper in the hearts of gamers who roamed the halls of the *USS Voyager* back in 2000.



FORMER GRAFTGOLD PROGRAMMER GARY FOREMAN ON STEVE TURNER

"Steve was the first, and one of the best bosses I ever had and he's not just a great game designer, but a fantastic coder too. He taught me a lot about the art of making games, although it might not have been so obvious to me at the time. Working at Graftgold was an amazing experience – it's no wonder that he was so well respected and that it was almost 30 years ago!"



INTERVIEW

STEVE TURNER

After writing a handful of impressive solo games for Hewson Consultants, Steve Turner joined up with Andrew Braybrook to form developer Graftgold. **games™** chats to him about the ups and downs of his long games career.

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Dragontorc (1984) Programmer



Quazatron (1986) Programmer



Ranarama (1987) Programmer

What was your first experience with computing?

I went to Abbs Cross Technical School in Hornchurch, Essex. I learned there to program in a language called ALGOL 60 and we wrote programs on special squared paper to give lists of square numbers. The computer was the size of a desk with some control panels on top and flashing lights. It was magic; like being in a spaceship. You fed your paper tape into it and the results were printed on output tape, which you fed into a teletypewriter. I then moved to Rayleigh Sweyne school and the school was raising money for charity; I was part of a group that designed and wrote a dating program, maybe the world's first! The idea was that people would fill in a form of their likes, and our program would find the best matches. It was a success and the results were printed on the school noticeboard.

Which computer was it that inspired you to create games?

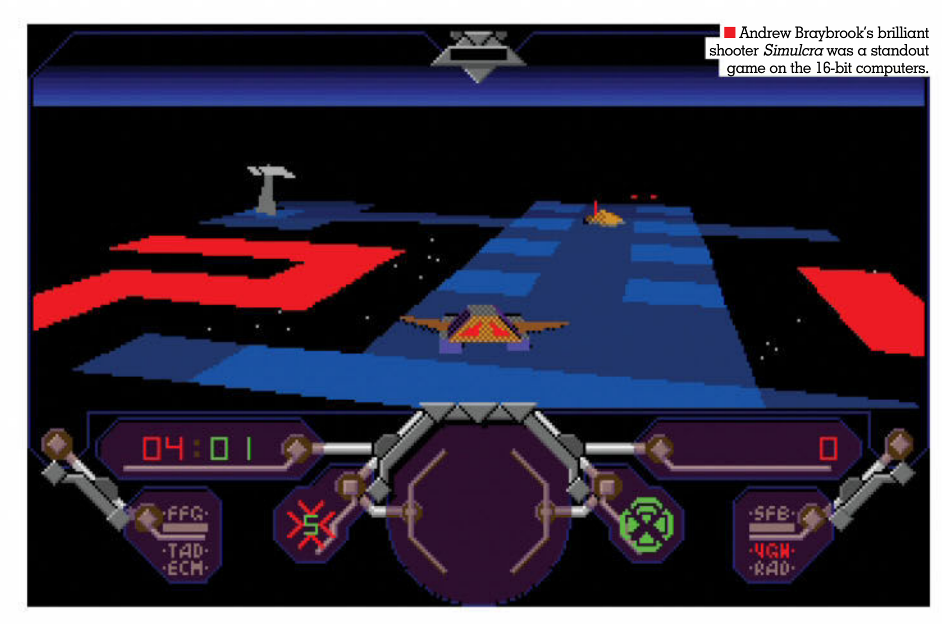
My first, the ZX80. It was so small compared to anything else I'd seen, and looked space age. I was so excited after programming all day at work – I worked for the civil service at their VAT HQ in Southend-on-Sea – that I would then get home and program into the night. I was initially disillusioned when I found out the ZX80 could not display moving graphics, but reverse-engineered it to find out if I could overcome this. That introduced me to Z80 assembler and gave me the grounding for writing games on the ZX Spectrum.

Tell us about your first commercial game.

I was about 30 when I saw the adverts for the Spectrum: high-res moving coloured graphics and at an affordable price! I wanted to do something different with my life, so began to write a game and noticed that most were 2D. I concluded the next step was a 3D-looking display which opened the size of the playing field and made many other types of game possible.

I SAW THE ADVERTS FOR THE SPECTRUM: HIGH-RES MOVING COLOURED GRAPHICS AND AT AN AFFORDABLE PRICE!

When I had finished it, I sent it to a number of publishers and chose Hewson, as they had an in-house duplication plant. They could produce as many cassettes as and when they needed, reducing costs. I also learned Andrew Hewson was another ex-pupil of Rayleigh Sweyne and he offered me a contract that was very professional. Hewson would publish the game and give



Andrew Braybrook's brilliant shooter *Simulcra* was a standout game on the 16-bit computers.

me a royalty each month of 15% of the net receipts. Andrew obviously knew about programming and understood the development process.

Did this then persuade you to work on games full time?

I'd seen adverts for games in magazines and knew I might be able to make a living out of it, if I did it in a disciplined way. When I had my first meeting with Hewson, I was sure that it would work while games were still a fad. I quit my job and worked at home to exactly the same hours as I had before. My first company was called ST Software. When *Avalon* was selling in huge numbers I realised I would have to pay loads of tax one year and may be broke the next, so it made sense to form a company that kept the money and paid a regular wage.

How did you come to then join forces with Andrew Braybrook?

Andrew was a friend I had met while playing *Space Invaders* in the local pub. I became a member of his rock band, so we knew each other quite well. He was another business programmer who used to write multiplayer games for his mainframe. He was interested in joining me and after getting a little stir-crazy working on my own, it seemed a good idea to employ him.

***Avalon* was a big success and a brilliant game, yet *Dragontorc* surpassed even that.**

Avalon had broken new ground and was way out on its own in its ideas. *Dragontorc* was a slightly more developed follow-up to *Avalon*, so I regard it as the better of the two. I managed to get a huge adventure trail of something like 400 steps, put emotions into the characters, you could annoy them, frighten them, panic them and make them like you. It was a complete blend of arcade and adventure, almost a new genre. We would come up with game ideas, program them and show early versions to Hewson. They used to leave the development entirely up to us, but would say if they didn't like something. The formula worked.

From 1986 you entered a golden period with Graftgold producing a number of big hits.

Actually, before *Quazatron*, my previous game had not sold well and I was under pressure to come up with something good. Games were taking longer to develop as we were putting so much into them, and they needed to sell more copies. I knew the gameplay from *Paradroid* was a winner, so married it with a graphic demo I had created after wondering how others were doing isometric graphics, which were popular. Then I did *Ranarama* which was also loosely based on *Paradroid*, just set in a fantasy scenario. Unfortunately Hewson didn't publish it until all the conversions were finished, which meant it got released alongside the sudden rush of *Gauntlet* conversions and clones. I remember a review saying it played better than all the other *Gauntlet* games, including the official one. I think it would have sold many more copies had it come out first.

What happened at the end of your relationship with Hewson?

We were very happy working with them right up until the end. But budget games were flooding the bottom of the 8-bit market and the top end was dominated by big-publicity licensed titles – Hewson were under increasing commercial pressure. Andrew and I were both in the latter stages of our next games when we learned that things weren't so good. Two of its in-house coders [Dominic Robinson and John Cumming] asked if they could join us, then one of Hewson's key staff members moved to Telecomsoft and arranged a meeting with us. They said they would publish our games and give us some extra funding to expand. Looking back, I was too driven by events, but it just all seemed to fall into place, like it was meant to be.

There were legal complications from the fallout with Hewson…

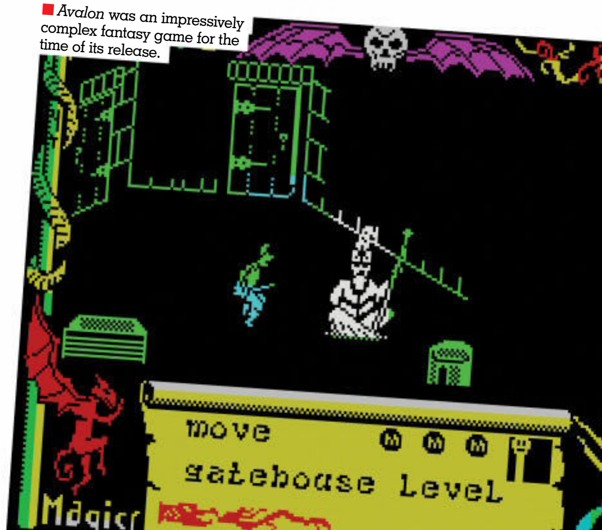
Part of the Telecomsoft deal was that they would legally protect us from any action by Hewson, assuring us that Hewson had no legal claim on the two titles that were in progress as we'd had no written contract. It went to court and the judge ruled that the games should be allowed to be published and Hewson could see if there was compensation due later. It was settled out of court before any final ruling, but I never knew the details of that.

What happened when Telecomsoft was sold to Microprose?

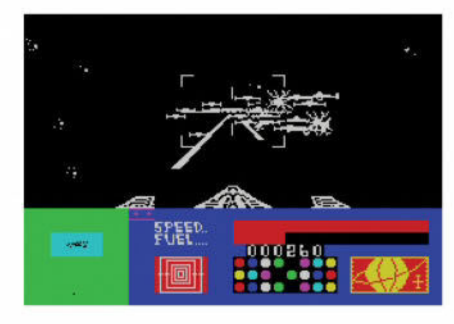
They [Microprose] failed to agree terms for Graftgold's next big original game, based on the Battle Of Britain. I took the design to Activision who suggested changing the scenario to a fantasy game with armies and *Realms* was the ensuing design. But I made the decision it was too dangerous to have just one publisher. We were approached by Virgin to develop *Off-Road Racer* when they heard how well we'd completed the *Rainbow Islands* conversions. Then, when Activision went into receivership, Virgin bought *Realms*. It was such a stormy time; in a short period, every publisher we had worked for – Hewson, Telecomsoft, Mirrorsoft and Activision – had either sold out, or ceased trading.

At this point Graftgold grew enormously. Were you still coding? How did you adapt to the commercial end of the 8-bit computers?

We needed a team of people on each game to make the game the best. We took on new



Avalon was an impressively complex fantasy game for the time of its release.



■ Steve Turner's first commercial game was *3D Space Wars* on the ZX Spectrum.

staff and developed a few products at the same time with different publishers in case one failed. So by necessity, we grew in size although many of the new staff were trainees and we trained them up on conversions. It was an exciting but scary time as development costs were going up all the time. I was still coding myself as well as doing management stuff – I would code at five in the morning to meet deadlines and then come in at nine to set an example. We actually moved successfully from the Spectrum and Commodore 64 but were hit hard by the end of the Sega Master System and Game Gear. Those machines had given us a lot of conversion work for Virgin, and it seemed to stop overnight with little warning. I suddenly had no work for my 8-bit team.

IN A SHORT PERIOD, EVERY PUBLISHER WE HAD WORKED FOR – HEWSON, TELECOMSOFT, MIRRORSOFT AND ACTIVISION – HAD EITHER SOLD OUT, OR CEASED TRADING

Another big jump for many was Sony's PlayStation console…

The PlayStation was a mixed blessing. The development kit was so expensive we could only afford a couple, which meant we could only have two programmers working. By this time we were totally dependent on advances from publishers and that gave them a lot of influence over us.

How did the end of Graftgold come about?

We were developing a PlayStation title called *Hardcorps*, a tank combat game, for a Japanese company called Coconuts. Its release got delayed for ages and I had an offer from Perfect Entertainment to take over the company, so we could be funded properly rather than living hand to mouth. I sold the majority of shares to Perfect, they called the shots and wanted to add lots of video sequences to *Hardcorps* and turn it into a mega game.

Eventually, they got a new publisher to fund the game, but they stopped giving Perfect advances so they stopped paying our wages. I had no company funding to draw on so were finished at a stroke. I'd seen it coming for a while but I was no longer in control and just hanging on. The end came as a shock and a relief because those two years had been a nightmare, trapped in a relationship that was clearly not working – but I couldn't change it. Losing it was a bit like a bereavement and after the dust settled, I joined Andrew at Eurobase writing insurance software, which seemed easy after what we'd been through.

Which of the post-8-bit era's games are you most proud of and which period do you look back at most fondly?

Probably *Realms* – it was our first original multiplatform game to be written as a team, and a great achievement. But that initial period with just Andrew and me working together was the most fun. We had ideas spilling out of us, and enough cash to do what we wanted.

What do you wish you'd done differently?

I wish I'd taken a management course earlier on. I eventually went on one, which helped a lot, helping me prioritise, rather than trying to do everything. I also regret selling to Perfect, especially when the Motox royalties finally came in [Graftgold's in-house 3D engine].

What are you up to today?

I've retired from Eurobase and keep myself busy writing a PC game. I learnt the drums last year and did a few remixes of my old computer tunes for Hewson. I also write a monthly blog, **www.graftgold.blogspot.co.uk**. Andrew lives close to me, we see each other regularly and I do like to follow what my ex-staff are up to. So many have their own companies today. It's a good feeling to know what grew out of Graftgold.



■ Fantasy adventure *Realms* started life as a Battle Of Britain war game.





■ Graftgold's immense Spectrum port of *Sky Shark*, aka *Flying Shark*, helped establish it as the go-to guys for conversion work.



■ One of Graftgold's finest hours: *Uridium*



GAME CHANGERS

ANIMAL CROSSING

Released: 15 September 2002 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EAD **System:** GameCube



Everybody's favourite anthropomorphic musician K.K. Slider is actually named after sound designer Kazumi Totaka. One of Totaka's most recognisable tracks – from various Nintendo titles including *Mario Paint*, *Yoshi's Story*, and *Luigi's Mansion* – is K.K's debut song.

Don't let the cute anthropomorphic animals fool you, 15 years on Animal Crossing is still one of the most realistic life-simulations to ever emerge

WE LOOK TO videogames to seek escapism from adult life, right? Adventure and excitement; comfort and friendship, gaming can give us all of these things from the relative safety of our living room. Why then, with literally thousands of games to choose from, did we ever decide to put ourselves through the terror and absurdity of something like *Animal Crossing*?

Look behind the sweetness and there's something very unsettling simmering below the surface. Is there any way that Nintendo could have known what it was unleashing onto the world when it first conceptualised Japan-exclusive *Dobutsu No Mori*? It's a game that would begin life on the 64DD, the peripheral's internal clock and improved memory used to power the simulation of a real-life village. It was to be a place populated by loveable anthropomorphic mammals, existing in real time to keep you hooked – for Nintendo, it was to be a hugely innovative stride forward.

Following the collapse of the N64's disk drive, Nintendo shifted development, first onto the N64 (*Animal Forest*, 2001) and eventually, famously, what we now know as *Animal Crossing* appeared for the first time in North America for the GameCube. The 2002 release was seemingly fun, friendly and safe, utilising Nintendo's new system to be the "real life game that's playing, even when you're not."

Looking back, *Animal Crossing* is actually pretty bleak. Sure, it's entertaining at first, but ends up as a torturous reflection of a consumerist, capitalist society. You might not remember it that way, if you haven't played any of the recent iterations, but just think about it for a moment. It's a paper-craft nightmare that launches off of the premise that you – a human in strange new place – have moved to a new village, viewed immediately as an outsider and put to work to pay off a ridiculous mortgage from local embezzler-turned-realtor Tom Nook. It's a game that succeeds, largely, because of how excellently it replicates the loop of our day-to-day lives – the cycle of labour, money and consumption brought to life in the sixth generation of consoles.

BEST CHARACTERS

WANT TO HAVE A GREAT TIME IN ANIMAL CROSSING? MAKE SURE YOU MEET THESE WONDERFUL CHARACTERS



K.K. SLIDER

★ K.K. Slider is the lovable hippy dog that travels to your village every week to sing a few tunes and have a few laughs. While K.K. has appeared in other *Animal Crossing* games, he has decided to become a DJ, which just isn't as cool as the roaming guitarist.



ROVER

★ You should have known going to this village was a bad idea when you got accosted on the train by a talking cat. Rover sits opposite you any time you travel, demanding details such as your name, birthday and location. He says he isn't crazy, but we have our doubts.



PETE

★ We always liked Pete. Unlike our real-life Royal Mail, his postal deliveries are always on time. At 9AM and 5PM he will appear to deliver your mail, and if you befriend him he will even tell a few stories about some of the other villagers.

■■■ The game thrives off of the fact that you want to engage in a type of fun that acts quite a bit like work – you spend all your time rattling through a list of banal tasks so that you can go relax. Sound familiar? And so you immediately fall into a routine, watching the clock to get your tasks completed before the sun sets. That's a mission made in earnest to earn enough Bells to purchase new tables, decorations and assorted junk to decorate your little slice of homely capitalist heaven.

Animal Crossing also forces you to interact with your neighbours. Each unique, with their own personalities, you'll need to earn their trust through conversation and favours on a daily basis. You'll establish friendships but maybe one day, in spite of your best efforts, they'll move away. You'll be sad but there's little time to dwell; some of your neighbours are upset you didn't talk to them for a few days. They'll make you work damn hard to earn even a simple pleasantry, often testing your reliability and memory with little quizzes – it's ridiculous but somehow utterly engaging, especially as one of them may reward a delivery of fresh coconuts with a brand new television.

Animal Crossing even manages to re-create bouts of unavoidable bad luck: a fortune-teller can curse you and bees will sting you, prompting neighbours to leer and make comments about your misfortunes. You'll be held personally accountable for anything that goes wrong in the village, including weeds springing up should you skip a day of gardening. You'll be assaulted should you make attempt to cheat the system and you'll routinely have Nook on your case about money; but that's *Animal Crossing*, the game that expertly makes busy-work look like play.

It hinges on you wanting to waste time in real time; it's part of the majesty of its design. Using the GameCube's internal clock and calendar, *Animal Crossing* wouldn't just cycle through day and night, but it would ensure everything runs whether you're there or not – and your neighbours would remember. The mailbox piles up with letters, trees would grow tall and weeds would litter the land requiring hours of clean up. It's through this in-game persistence that *Animal Crossing* pulls a wondrous shift in your attitude towards it as time goes on.

Whether it's in a real or virtual life, nobody should live to work. You shouldn't need to die in the pursuit of happiness, because it's there waiting for whenever you accept your lot in life. After weeks spent buying a bigger house, paying escalating loan fees, collecting matching furniture, and dealing with an array of ridiculous citizen concerns, eventually it the time comes to stop doing what you think you *have* to do and just do what you *want* to do.

Travel to your friends' villages to find exotic new fruit, make new buddies, hunt down and play the hidden NES games, and wait outside the station for K.K. Slider – just because. To an extent, what you find in *Animal Crossing* is that which you brought with you. It's a clever reflection of life that builds from the player; it provides an adorable blank canvas for you to paint over with your own memories and experiences. *Animal Crossing* taught us to step back from the monotony of work and to take the time to smell the roses. Just remember to watch out for the bees.

THE GAME THRIVES OFF THE FACT THAT YOU'VE SELECTED A TYPE OF PLAY THAT ACTS QUITE A BIT LIKE WORK

KEY FACTS

- There are over 15 collectible NES games hidden within *Animal Crossing* that can be found and played from your home. Due to the advent of the Virtual Console, this is the last time the series would include such an option.

- *Animal Crossing* included special areas that could only be accessed with either a Nintendo eReader or GBA link-up. While they weren't necessary to the game, they sure did help expand its horizons.



GAME CHANGERS

ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES IN ANIMAL CROSSING

WORKING IN REAL TIME, YOU'LL NEED TO PATIENTLY PROCEED THROUGH THIS LIFE SIM TO SEE IT ALL



PLANT A TREE

Once you've got yourself a little shovel, you'll be able to dig holes and plant stuff in the ground. While this may sound tame, there's an almost magical quality about planting a flower or fruit one day and then seeing a little sprout appear the next. Plus, growing produce is key to keeping the coffers full and Nook off your back.



WAIT FOR K.K. SLIDER

One of the coolest things to find in *Animal Crossing* is K.K. Slider, a musician who would arrive in your village every Saturday evening between 8:00pm and 12:00am. Found outside the Train Station, sat on a stool with an acoustic guitar, K.K. sits waiting for you to request a song or ask for him to choose one from the 50 in his repertoire.



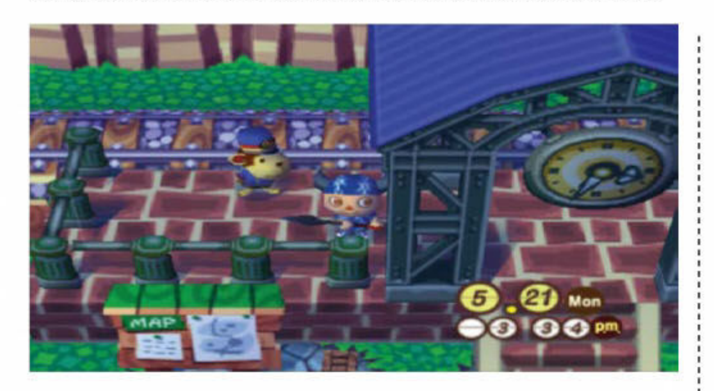
MAKE FRIENDS

■ One of the biggest draws to *Animal Crossing* are the animals in the village. Each has their own distinct personality, so figuring out your neighbor's likes and dislikes was key, interacting with them was a key break between jobs, just don't leave your town untended for too long – they might just leave forever; or just hate you. Both are bad outcomes.



REMEMBER TO PARTY

■ There's a huge amount to do in Animal Crossing, but you'll also need to keep one eye on the calendar. Animal Crossing doesn't just follow our time it reflects it. Seasons change and holidays come and go; you'd need to return on Halloween and Christmas to see special parties, outfits and gifts.



TAKE A TRIP

■ It was as easy as adding a second memory card to your GameCube to visit another friend's town. It was kind of impressive for Nintendo at the time, not only did this give you an opportunity to collect new fruit, find unique items, but you could also meet new and unique villagers, some of whom may like you so much that they move into your town.



MESS WITH FRUIT ECONOMY

■ Should you happen to venture into a friend's village or the little island hidden at sea, you'll have the opportunity to snap up fruit and items that aren't local to your area. Grabbing new exports and growing them in your own town can prove to be highly lucrative, plus your picky neighbours will (probably) love it!



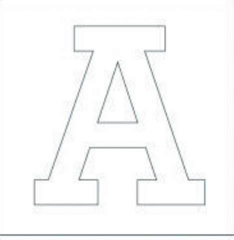
LOOK OUT FOR WANDERING FOLK

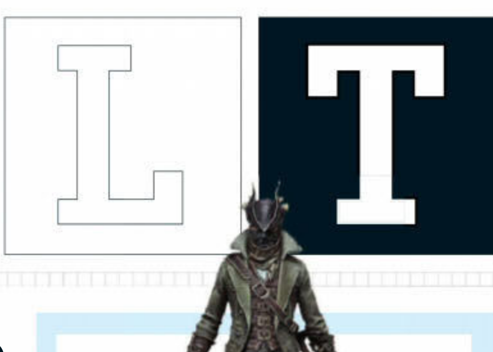
■ Wandering sales folk would often appear sporadically in your village. A ghostly figure that could clear up all the weeds in the town, a fortune teller with a bad temper and travelling carpet salesmen who want all of your money for fancy rugs. Non-essential to the game? Sure, but the rarity of such appearances made them feel monuments.



GO FISHING

■ Fishing was a fun activity in *Animal Crossing*, even though you mostly pulled junk up from the river and ocean. Not only would this prove to be an easy way to make Bells – Tom Nook would buy any old crap – but you would occasionally come across some rarities. Besides, it's actually pretty relaxing, for some unknown reason.



THE VAULT

NIMBUS WIRELESS CONTROLLER

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£39.95**

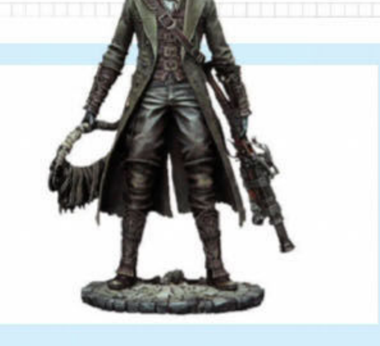
SINCE APPLE DOESN'T provide an official game controller for its devices and with the latest iteration of the Apple TV offering game support for a wide range of titles, SteelSeries has stepped into the gap with a Bluetooth solution. Compatible with Macs, iPads from the fourth generation and with iPhone 5 upwards as well as the fourth generation Apple TV, this controller is in a good spot to offer gaming support for anyone with an Apple device bought in the last couple of years.

The device itself is very easy to set up, with only a Bluetooth connection needed to get started. A compatible games list can be found on the official companion app for the controller and each of them will instantly recognise the remote as your primary input device. We played some *Pac-Man 256* and *Beach Buggy Racing* to see how it handled time-sensitive inputs and found that there was only the faintest hint at latency in communication between devices. It was so subtle as to not really be too much of an issue.

The build of the controller itself is also very good. Perhaps not on the same level as official controllers for Xbox One or PS4, but far superior to what you might get from most third-party gamepads. The analogue sticks offer a satisfying level of resistance, the triggers are springy and the face buttons solid. Only the shoulder buttons feel a little soft.

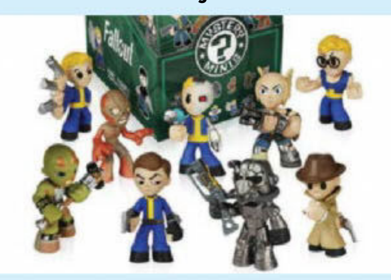


If you've invested in an Apple TV then this is an essential addition to your setup for playing more robust games.



BLOODBORNE HUNTER STATUE

Painstakingly recreated from the game's box art, this statue has some fantastic detailing on it, such as the chain that sits around the Hunter's scarf to the Saw Cleaver that can be unfolded to its full size.
www.thinkgeek.com



FUNKO MYSTERY MINIS: FALLOUT

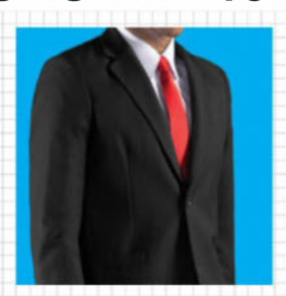
For those of you still consumed by the Commonwealth, these mystery boxed items should amuse. With figures based on Super Mutants, Ghouls, and even the Mysterious Stranger, there's some good figures in this collection.
www.thinkgeek.com



ZELDA NENDOROID

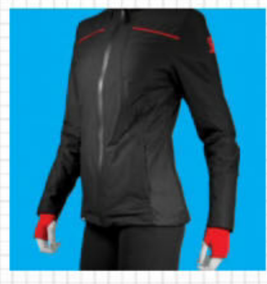
The Nendoroid designs are insanely cute with their chibi style, and the *Wind Waker* incarnation of Princess Zelda, much like Link before her, is a perfect fit for these figures. Naturally, she comes armed with her bow, ready to fight.
www.forbiddenplanet.com

GAMING CLOTHING



ULTIMATE AGENT 47 SET

Your one-stop shop for a brand new Agent look. Each of these items from suit jacket to cufflinks can be bought separately, but the full ensemble is the way to go if you ask us. Pretty reasonably priced for a full suit, too.
www.musterbrand.com



FAITH JACKET

Inspired by Faith's new look in *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*, this waterproof jacket is designed with free-running needs in mind. Breathable fabric should mean it's always comfy, and storm cuffs will keep the rooftop chills at bay.
www.musterbrand.com



CHUN-LI HOODIE

This is quite a fun interpretation of Chun-Li's classic outfit in hoodie form, including great details like the buns on her head and the shoulder details on her traditional dress. Other characters are available.
www.yellowbulldog.co.uk



THE DIVISION PREMIUM PS4 SKIN

SOLD BY: **CONSOLESKINS.NL**
PRICE: **€17.99**

THIS FULL SET of vinyl stickers fully covers the PS4 and leaves it looking very striking. It includes stickers for two controllers as well and a rear sticker for those who like to have their console standing.
www.consoleskins.nl



ROCKET LEAGUE PS4 SKIN

SOLD BY: **CONSOLESKINS.NL**
PRICE: **€14.99**

IF YOU'RE A fan of the chaotic car-based football (?) game, then slapping these set of vinyls on your PS4 probably won't seem like too much of a stretch for your fandom. The *Rocket League* love runs deep.
www.consoleskins.nl



PS1 CUSTOM CONTROLLER SKIN

SOLD BY: **CONSOLESKINS.NL**
PRICE: **€7.99**

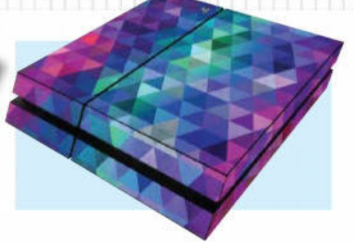
THIS IS A nice, simple way of giving your PS4 a little personality as the classic PlayStation console look is given new life on your controller. Consoleskins promises no residue when taking it off too.
www.consoleskins.nl



BALLER XBOX ONE SKIN

SOLD BY: **CONSOLESKINS.NL**
PRICE: **€16.99**

AS SKIN SETS for the Xbox One go, this is a pretty subtle collection, but we like the small flash of colour it gives the beast of a console. This one is available in a matt finish as well.
www.consoleskins.nl



CHARMED PS4 SKIN

SOLD BY: **DECALGIRL.COM**
PRICE: **$19.99**

WE PARTICULARLY LIKE the matt/satin finish on this skin from DecalGirl as well as the smart and colourful geometric design. It's flashy without being garish, which is a tricky line to walk.
www.decalgirl.com



HALLUCINATION PS4 CONTROLLER SKIN

SOLD BY: **DECALGIRL.COM**
PRICE: **€9.99**

CONTROLLER DECALS CAN get away with being a little more garish than consoles can and this sticker set for the PS4 controller is pretty interesting. The skull motif at the centre really ties it together nicely.
www.decalgirl.com



WOODEN GAMING SYSTEM XBOX ONE SKIN

SOLD BY: **DECALGIRL.COM**
PRICE: **$29.99**

INSPIRED BY CLASSIC consoles of the 80s, this wooden look for the Xbox One makes it look like even more of a home furnishing than Microsoft's original design. It gives the console a little class.
www.decalgirl.com



RETRO HORIZONTAL NEW 3DS SKIN

SOLD BY: **DECALGIRL.COM**
PRICE: **$16.99**

IF YOU'VE MISSED out on the NES-themed 3DS handhelds and don't want to pay a premium for one then this vinyl set seems like a smart compromise to us giving you all the key features.
www.decalgirl.com



COMPOSITION NOTEBOOK NEW 3DS SKIN

SOLD BY: **DECALGIRL.COM**
PRICE: **$16.99**

THIS IS ONE of the cooler decals we've seen, disguising the 3DS as a classic notebook. There's a version for the PS4 as well, although that may be slightly less convincing. A nice idea, though.
www.decalgirl.com



ARTCADE

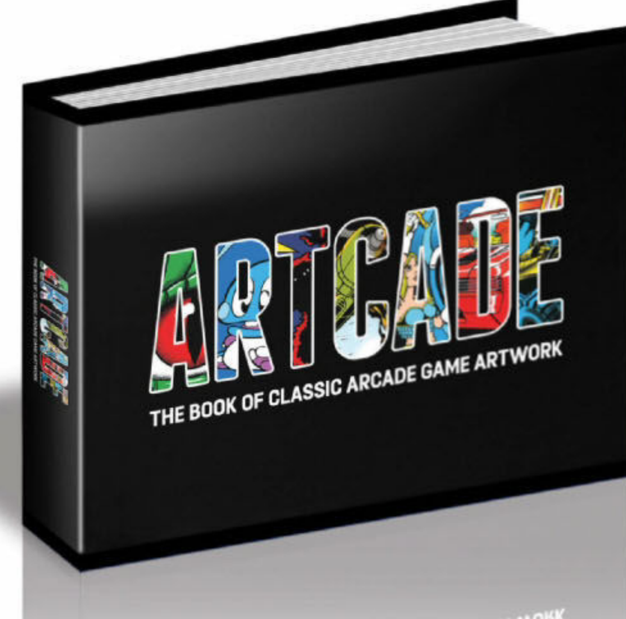
PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**

PICKING UP THIS art book, you may not at first be able to fully appreciate the amount of work that has gone into filling 324 pages with stunning arcade marquees artwork, but what you need to keep in mind is that every single one of them has been digitally restored to their former glory, thanks to the efforts of Tim Nicholls. He originally got access to some 40 years of arcade cabinet marquees from a prop company in Hollywood who had been holding onto them and the restoration job that has been done is very impressive.

The collection goes from *Death Race* in 1976 to *Alien Vs Predator* in 1994 and includes some fantastically strange and glorious pieces of work, interspersed with some nice photography of the marquees in their natural habitat and a couple of interviews. And if we were to have one complaint about this book it would only be that we would have liked a couple more interviews with people involved in the process of creating these pieces. The creation of marquees to sit on top of arcade machines was a peculiar and unique art that has since been lost. The work in this book is a testament to the talent of those involved. But it really is a small complaint against the vast wealth of content and the time it took to compile it.

Ultimately, this book does an amazing job of showcasing these wide pieces, with the gutter of the book offering only a mild frustration in dividing the pieces in two. The quality of the printing and the paper are superb, making this a very high-quality coffee table book.

www.bitmapbooks.com



VERDICT 8/10



THE ART OF DEUS EX UNIVERSE

Collecting the art of *Human Revolution* and *Mankind Divided*, this collection has some of the most striking concept art from one of the best art teams in the business at Eidos Montreal. These guys do some amazing work and the way it is translated to the game is pretty incredible too.

www.titanbooks.com



HALO: THE FALL OF REACH

Telling the well-known story of the Spartan-II program and the rise of Master Chief John-117, this graphic novel was written by the lead writer of *Halo 5: Guardians*. See all the action unfold on Reach as the Spartans face an unexpected enemy in the Covenant for the first time.

www.darkhorse.com



INDIE GAMES

Thanks to interviews with leading industry figures such as David Braben and Tim Schafer as well as up and coming development teams like The Chinese Room and Hello Games, this look at the rise of indie production and the key games that have proven its success is an interesting read.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



Imagine Publishing Ltd
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☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
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Magazine team

Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
☎ 01202 586213
Art Editor **Andy Salter**
Features Editor **Josh West**
Production Editor **Rebecca Richards**
Editor In Chief **Dan Hutchinson**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Publishing Director **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors

Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, Dan Griliopoulos, Mike Jackson, Darran Jones, Graeme Mason, Dennis Murphy, Michael Plant, Dominic Reseigh-Lincoln, Chet Roivas, Ed Smith

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Advertising

Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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www.imaginesubs.co.uk
Head Of Subscriptions Sharon Todd

Circulation

Circulation Director Darren Pearce

Production

Production Director Jane Hawkins

Finance

Finance Director Marco Peroni

Founder

Group Managing Director Damian Butt

Printing & Distribution

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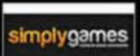
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